THE
MAGNUS
ARCHIVES

The Magnus Archives

Transcripts Archive Archive A (Extremely Unofficial)

Created by

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MAG000.1 – Seed (Trailer)

MYSTERIOUS VOICE

[Faint over static] Vigilo. Audio. Opperior.

[Getting louder, quicker and more staticky]

Vigilo. Audio. Opperior.

Vigilo. Audio. Opperior.

Vigilo. Audio. Opperior.

Vigilo. Audio. Opperior.

Vigilo. Audio. Opperior.

MAG000.2 – Pre-Launch Trailer

Statement #20111507

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Test… test…

Elias, hopefully if you hear this it means I've found a way to record those 'difficult' statements I was telling you about. While I hate to speak ill of the dead, the previous Archivist left this place in such a dreadful mess, even an organisation with such an 'unusual' focus as the Magnus Institute needs a well-organised archive. As you know, I've been going through trying to digitise and record audio versions but I've been having trouble with a few of the more… bizarre statements. There have been sufficient distortions as to make them utterly unintelligible.

Thankfully, though, I managed to unearth this old tape recorder from storage, and these cassettes, archaic as they may be, are still better than nothing. So, with that in mind, I thought I'd take it for a spin, as it were. I've taken the shortest of the problem statements, and I'm trying it here. Frankly, I wouldn't normally bother with something so… fragmented but it should be fine as a test.

Statement of Jacob, no second name given, regarding… god knows what. Original statement given July 15th 2011.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

It'll get you too. You can stare all you want, make your notes and your inquiries, but all your beholding will come to nothing. When the time arrives, and all is darkness and butchery, you'll wish you had stopped listening and run.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends. Yes, well, you see why I wouldn't have otherwise recorded it. Not exactly something for posterity, but, nonetheless, let me know if you're able to hear that correctly Elias. If so, I think we can begin transcribing the rest of the statements.

[CLICK]

MAG000.3 – Launch Trailer

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Nathan Watts, regarding an encounter on Old Fishmarket Close, Edinburgh.

Original statement giv–

[CLUNK]

[Inquiringly] Hello? *[Pause]* Hello?

…

This archive is off-limits.

[MUFFLED THUD]

Is anyone there?

…

Martin? Martin, is that you?

…

[CHAIR SCRAPES]

I swear, if he's brought another dog in here, I'm going to peel him.
[Voice fades as Archivist leaves]

[SILENCE, THEN…]

MYSTERIOUS VOICE

[Faint over static] Vigilo. Audio. Opperior.

[Getting louder, quicker and more staticky]

Vigilo. Audio. Opperior.

Vigilo. Audio. Opperior.

Vigilo. Audio. Opperior.

Vigilo. Audio. Opperior.

Vigilo. Audio. Opperior.

ARCHIVIST

[muttering impatiently to self] …piled so many files on a shelf. Don't buy them from IKEA. Oh, it's, uh, still running.

[CLEARS THROAT]

Let's, uh, let's try this again.

[CLICK]

MAG001 – Anglerfish

Statement #0122204

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Test… Test… Test… 1, 2, 3… Right.

[Cough]

My name is Jonathan Sims. I work for the Magnus Institute, London, an organisation dedicated to academic research into the esoteric and the paranormal. The head of the Institute, Mr. Elias Bouchard, has employed me to replace the previous Head Archivist, one Gertrude Robinson, who has recently passed away.

I have been working as a researcher at the Institute for four years now and am familiar with most of our more significant contracts and projects. Most reach dead ends, predictably enough, as incidents of the supernatural, such as they are – and I always emphasise there are very few genuine cases – tend to resist easy conclusions. When an investigation has gone as far as it can, it is transferred to the Archives.

Now, the Institute was founded in 1818, which means that the Archive contains almost 200 years of case files at this point.

Combine that with the fact that most of the Institute prefers the ivory tower of pure academia to the complicated work of dealing with statements or recent experiences and you have the recipe for an impeccably organised library and an absolute mess of an archive. This isn't necessarily a problem – modern filing and indexing systems are a real wonder, and all it would need is a half-decent archivist to keep it in order. Gertrude Robinson was apparently not that archivist.

From where I am sitting, I can see thousands of files. Many spread loosely around the place, others crushed into unmarked boxes. A few have dates on them or helpful labels such as 86-91 G/H. Not only that, but most of these appear to be handwritten or produced on a typewriter with no accompanying digital or audio versions of any sort. In fact, I believe the first computer to ever enter this room is the laptop that I brought in today. More importantly, it seems as though little of the actual investigations have been stored in the Archives, so the only thing in most of the files are the statements themselves.

It is going to take me a long, long time to organise this mess. I've managed to secure the services of two researchers to assist me. Well, technically three, but I don't count Martin as he's unlikely to contribute anything but delays. I plan to digitise the files as much as possible and record audio versions, though some will have to be on tape recorder, as my attempts to get them on my laptop have met with… significant audio distortions.

Alongside this Tim, Sasha and, yes, I suppose, Martin will be doing

some supplementary investigation to see what details may be missing from what we have. I'll try to present these in as succinct a fashion as I can at the end of each statement. I can, unfortunately, promise no order in regards to date or theme of the statements that are recorded, and can only apologise to any future researcher attempting to use these files for their own investigations.

That's probably enough time spent making my excuses for the state of this place, and I suppose we have to begin somewhere.

Statement of Nathan Watts, regarding an encounter on Old Fishmarket Close, Edinburgh. Original statement given April 22nd 2012. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

This all happened a couple of years ago, so I apologise if some of the details are a bit off. I mean, I feel like I remember it clearly but sometimes things are so weird that you start to doubt yourself. Still, I suppose weird is kind of what you guys do, right?

So I'm studying at the University of Edinburgh. Biochemistry, specifically, and I was in my second year at the time this happened. I wasn't in any sort of university accommodation at this point, and was renting a student flat down in Southside with a few other second years.

To be honest, I didn't hang out with them much. I took a gap year before matriculating, and my birthday's in the wrong part of September, so I was nearly two years older than most of my peers when I started my course. I got on with them fine, you understand, but I tended to end up hanging out with some of the older students.

That's why I was at the party in the first place. Michael MacAulay, a good friend of mine, had just been accepted to do a Master's degree in Earth Sciences so we decided a celebration was in order. Well, maybe 'party' isn't quite the right word, we just kind of invaded the Albanach down on the Royal Mile, and drank long enough and loud enough that eventually we had the back area to ourselves. Now, I don't know how well you know the drinking holes of Edinburgh, but the Albanach has a wide selection of some excellent single malts, and I may have slightly overindulged. I have vague memories of Mike suggesting I slow down, to which I responded by roundly swearing at him for failing to properly celebrate his own good news. Or words to that effect.

Long story short, I was violently ill around midnight, and made the decision to walk the route home. It wasn't far to my flat, maybe half an hour if I'd been sober, and the night was cool enough that I remember having a hope the chill would perk me up some. I headed for the Cowgate and the quickest way to get there from the Royal Mile is down Old Fishmarket Close. Now, I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that there are some steep hills in Edinburgh but Old Fishmarket Close is exceptional, even by those standards. At times it must reach a thirty or forty degree angle, which is hard enough to

navigate when you don't have that much scotch inside you. As I have mentioned, I had quite a lot, so it probably wasn't that surprising when I took a rather nasty tumble about halfway down the street.

In retrospect, the fall wasn't that bad compared to what it could have been, but at the time, it really shook me up, and left me with some nasty bruises. I picked myself up as best I could, checked I hadn't seriously injured myself, no broken bones or anything, and decided to roll a cigarette to calm myself. That was when I heard it.

"Can I have a cigarette?"

I was startled out of my thoughts by the words as I thought I had been alone. Quickly trying to compose myself and looking around, I noticed a small alleyway on the opposite side of the street. It was very narrow and completely unlit with a short staircase leading up. I could see a light fixture a little way up the wall at its entrance, but it either wasn't working or wasn't turned on, meaning that beyond a few steps the alley was shrouded in total darkness. Stood there, a couple of stairs from the street, was a figure. It was hard to tell much about them as they were mostly in the shadows, though if I'd had to guess I would have said the voice sounded male. They seemed to sway, ever so slightly, as I watched, and I assumed that they, like me, were probably a little bit drunk.

I lit my own cigarette and held out my tobacco towards them, though I didn't approach, and asked if they were ok with a roll-up. The figure didn't move except to continue that gentle swaying.

Writing it down now, it seems so obvious that something was wrong. If I hadn't been so drunk, maybe I'd have noticed quicker, but even when the stranger asked the question again, "Can I have a cigarette?" utterly without intonation, still I didn't understand why I was so uneasy.

I stared at the stranger and as my eyes began to adjust I could make out more details. I could see that their face appeared blank, expressionless, and their skin seemed damp and slightly sunken, like they had a bad fever. The swaying was more pronounced now, seeming to move from the waist, side to side, back and forth. By this point, I had finished rolling a second cigarette, and gingerly held it out towards them, but I didn't get any closer. I had decided that if this weirdo wanted a cigarette, they were going to need to come out of the creepy alleyway. They didn't come closer, didn't make any movement at all except for that damn swaying. For some reason the thought of an anglerfish popped into my head, the single point of light dangled into the darkness, hiding the thing that lures you in.

"Can I have a cigarette?" It spoke again in the same flat voice and I realised exactly what was wrong. Its mouth was closed, had been the whole time. Whatever was repeating that question, it wasn't the figure in the alleyway. I looked at their feet and saw that they weren't quite touching the ground. The stranger's form was being lifted, ever so slightly, and moved gently from side to side.

I dropped the cigarette and grabbed for my phone, trying to turn on the torch. I don't know why I didn't run or what I hoped to see in

that alley, but I wanted to get a better look. As soon as I took out my phone, the figure disappeared. It sort of folded at the waist and vanished back into the darkness, as if a string had gone taut and pulled it back. I turned on the torch and stared into the alley, but I saw nothing. Just silence and darkness. I staggered back up to the Royal Mile, which still had lights and people, and found a taxi to take me home.

I slept late the next day. I'd made sure I didn't have any lectures or classes, as I had intended to be sleeping off a heavy night of drinking, which I guess I was, although it was that bizarre encounter that kept playing in my mind. And so, after making my way through two litres of water, some painkillers and a very greasy breakfast, I felt human enough to leave my flat and go to investigate the place in daylight. The result was unenlightening. There were no marks, no bloodstains, nothing to indicate that the swaying figure had ever been there at all. The only thing I did find was an unsmoked Marlboro Red cigarette, lying just below the burned out light fixture.

Beyond that, I didn't really know what to do. I did as much research as I could on the place, but couldn't find anyone who'd had any experience similar to mine, and there didn't seem to be any folklore or urban legends I could find out about Old Fishmarket Close. The few friends I told about what happened just assumed I'd been accosted by some stranger and the alcohol had made it seem much weirder than it was. I tried to explain that I've never had hallucinations while drunk, and that there was no way this guy had

just been a normal person, but they always gave me one of those looks, halfway between pity and concern, and I'd shut up.

I never did find out anything else about it, but a few days later I saw some missing person appeals go up around campus. Another student had disappeared. John Fellowes, his name was, though I didn't really know the guy and couldn't tell you much about him, except for two things that struck me as very important: he had been at that same party and, as far as I remembered, had still been there when I left. The other was just that, well, on the photo they'd used for his missing persons appeal, I couldn't help but notice that there was a pack of Marlboro Red cigarettes poking out of his pocket.

I haven't quit smoking, but I do find that I take a lot more taxis now if I find myself out too late.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

The investigation at the time, and the follow-up we've done over the last couple of days, have found no evidence to corroborate Mr. Watts' account of his experience. I was initially inclined to re-file this statement in the 'Discredited' section of the Archive, a new category I've created that will, I suspect, be housing the majority of these files.

However, Sasha did some digging into the police reports of the time and it turns out that between 2005 and 2010, when Mr. Watts' encounter supposedly took place, there were six disappearances in

and around the Old Fishmarket Close: Jessica McEwen in November 2005, Sarah Baldwin in August 2006, Daniel Rawlings in December of the same year, then Ashley Dobson and Megan Shaw in May and June of 2008. Then finally, as Mr. Watts mentioned, John Fellowes in March 2010. All six disappearances remain unsolved. Baldwin and Shaw were definitely smokers, but there's no evidence either way about the others, if they're even connected.

Sasha did find one other thing, specifically in the case of Ashley Dobson. It was a copy of the last photograph taken by her phone and sent to her sister Siobhan. The caption was "check out this drunk creeper lol", but the picture is of a darkened, apparently empty, alleyway, with stairs leading up into it. It appears to be the same alleyway which Mr. Watts described in his statement, the one that, according to the maps of the area, leads to Tron Square, but there doesn't seem to be anyone in the photograph at all.

Sasha took the liberty of running it through some editing programs, though, and increasing the contrast appears to reveal the outline of a long, thin hand, roughly at what would be waist level on a male of average height. I find it oddly hard to shake off the impression that it's beckoning.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG002 – Do Not Open

Statement #9982211

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Joshua Gillespie, regarding his time in possession of an apparently empty wooden casket. Original statement given November 22nd, 1998. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

It started when I was in Amsterdam for a holiday with a few of my friends. Everything you're thinking right now, you're right. We were all early twenties, just graduated and decided to spend a couple of weeks going crazy on the continent, so you can almost certainly fill in all the blanks yourself. There were very few points where I'd say that I was entirely sober and even fewer where I acted like it, though I wasn't quite as bad as some of my friends who had a hard time handling themselves at times.

This may have been why I headed out alone that morning – no idea of the exact date but it was sometime in mid-May. The others were

sleeping off their assorted hangovers and I decided to head out into the beautiful sunshine of that Netherlands morning and take a walk. Before graduating from Cardiff with the others, I had been studying Architecture, so was looking forward to spending a few hours by myself to wander, and really take in the buildings of central Amsterdam. I was not disappointed – it's a beautiful city, but I realised too late that I hadn't taken any map or guidebook with me, and an hour or two later I was thoroughly lost.

I wasn't particularly worried, as it was still mid-afternoon at this point, and getting lost in the backstreets had kind of been what I was trying to do, but I still decided I'd better make an actual effort to find my way back to where my friends and I were staying off Elandsstraat. I managed it eventually, but my inability to speak Dutch meant I spent a good hour riding the wrong way on the various trams.

By the time I got back to Elandsstraat it was starting to get dark and I was feeling quite stressed, so I decided to pop into one of the cafés to relax before joining up with my friends. I couldn't say for sure exactly how long I was in there, but I do know it had gotten fully dark by the time I noticed I wasn't sat at my table alone.

I've tried to describe the man who now sat opposite me many times, but it's difficult. He was short, very short, and felt like he had an odd density to him. His hair was brownish, I think, cut quite short, and he was clean shaven. His face and dress was utterly unremarkable, and the more I try to think of exactly what he looked like, the harder it is to picture him clearly. To be honest, though,

I'm inclined to blame that on the drugs.

The man introduced himself as John, and asked how I was. I replied as best I could, and he nodded, saying he also was an Englishman inside a foreign land. I remember he used that exact phrase because it struck me at the time as very odd. He said he was from Liverpool, though I don't recall him having any sort of accent, and that he was looking for a friend who he could rely on for a favour.

Now, high as I was, I got suspicious as soon as he said that last part and I started to shake my head. John said it was nothing too onerous, just looking after a package for him until he had some friends pick it up, and that he would pay well. I thought he was talking about smuggling, and was about to refuse again when he reached into his… jacket, I think? and pulled out an envelope. Inside was £10,000. I know; I counted it. I knew it was a stupid move but I kept remembering my friend Richard telling me how easy it had been to get a pound of hash through customs on his first trip to Holland, and holding that much cash in my hands…

I said yes. John smiled, thanked me, and said that he would be in touch. He left the coffee shop and I immediately started panicking about what I had agreed to. I wanted to chase after him and return the money, but something weighed me down, kept me locked into my seat. I just sat there for a long time.

I don't remember much about the next few days except worrying about when I'd see John again. I was careful not to spend any of the money he'd given me, and had decided to return it as soon as he

turned up. I'd say I had made a mistake and couldn't take his money or look after anything from him. I tried to enjoy myself, but it was like this shadow hanging over me, and I couldn't stop thinking about it. I waited for days, right up until the end of our trip, but he never showed up. I obsessively checked my suitcase before boarding the plane home, just in case someone had snuck something into it, but there was nothing new in there. I flew back to England with my friends still high and £10,000 tucked into my coat pocket. It was surreal.

It wasn't until almost a year later that I felt confident enough to actually spend any of the money. I'd moved down to work for a small architects' firm in Bournemouth on the south coast. It was an entry level job and the pay wasn't great, but it was the only offer I got in my chosen field, so I moved down there with the hopes of getting some experience and a better position in a year or two.

Bournemouth was a decent-size seaside town, though much less idyllic than I'd assumed it would have been, but rents for a place on my own were a little bit out of my price range, given my starting pay grade. I didn't know anyone else down there, and wasn't keen to share my space with strangers, so I decided to use some of the money I'd been given in Amsterdam the previous year. I reasoned they were unlikely to find me at this stage – I'd not given John any of my details when he spoke to me, not even my name, and if they hadn't been able to find me over the course of the last year, it was doubtful they'd be able to track me here. Also, if it had been drug smuggling, as I suspected, £10,000 probably wasn't so much money

to them that they'd track me this far over it. Also, and looking back this sounds stupid, but I'd just grown a beard and thought it would be hard for anyone to recognise me as the same guy. So I spent a bit of John's money on renting a nice one-bedroom flat in the Triangle, near the town centre, and moved in almost immediately.

About a week later, I was in my kitchen cutting up some fruit for breakfast, and I heard the doorbell ring. I answered it to see two red-faced delivery men. Between them they carried an immense package, which they'd clearly had to manoeuvre up the narrow stairs of the building I lived in. They asked if I was Joshua Gillespie, and when I said yes they said they had a delivery addressed to me and pushed past into the hall.

They didn't seem to be from any delivery company I knew and they weren't wearing any uniforms. I tried to ask them some questions, but as soon as they'd placed the box on the floor, they turned around and walked out. They were both well over six feet tall and very imposing, so there was little I could have done to stop them leaving even if I'd wanted to. The door slammed behind them, and I was left alone with this package.

It was about two metres long, maybe one metre wide and roughly the same deep. It was sealed with parcel tape and written on the top was my name and address in thick curving letters but there was no return address or postmark of any sort. I was starting to risk being late for work at this point, but I decided I couldn't bring myself to leave without seeing what was inside, so I fetched the knife from my kitchen counter and cut the tape keeping the box

closed.

Inside was a coffin. I don't know what I expected but it wasn't that. My knife fell to the floor and I just stared at it in mute surprise. It was made of unvarnished, pale yellow wood and had a thick metal chain wrapped around it, which was closed at the top with a heavy iron padlock. The lock was closed but had the key sitting inside it. I started to reach for it, when I noticed two other things on the coffin lid. The first was a piece of paper, folded in half and tucked under the chain, which I took. The other was the presence of three words, scratched deep into the wood of the casket in letters three inches high. They read: DO NOT OPEN.

I withdrew my hand from the padlock slowly, unsure what I was supposed to do. At some point I must have sat down, as I found myself on the floor, propped up against the wall, staring at this bizarre thing that had inexplicably turned up at my home. I remembered the piece of paper at this point and unfolded it, but it simply read "Delivered with gratitude – J". Strange as it sounds, it was only then I made the connection with the man I'd met in Amsterdam. He'd told me he wanted someone to look after a package for a while. Was this the package he was talking about? Was I to be looking after a corpse? Who was coming to pick it up? When?

I called in sick to work, and just sat there, watching the coffin for what might have been minutes or might have been hours. I just had no idea what to do. Eventually I steeled myself and moved towards it, until my face was just inches away from the lid. I took a deep

breath, trying to see if I could smell anything from inside. Nothing. If there was a dead body in there, it hadn't started to smell yet. Not that I really knew what a dead body smelled like. It was early summer at this point, which would mean they must have died recently. If there was a body in there at all. As I got up, my hand brushed the wood of the coffin and I realised it was warm. Very warm, like it had been lying in the sun for hours. Something about it made my flesh crawl slightly and I withdrew my hand quickly.

I decided to make a cup of tea. It was something of a relief, standing next to the kettle, as from that angle I couldn't see the thing out in the hall. I could just ignore it. I didn't move even after I'd filled my mug; I just stood there sipping my tea, not even noticing that it was still far too hot to drink comfortably. When I finally got the nerve to step back out into the hall, the coffin still lay there, unmoving.

I finally made a decision and, firmly gripping the padlock, I removed the key, and placed it on the hall table next to the door. I then took hold of the coffin and chain and started to pull it further into my flat. It was weird to touch it: the wood still had that unsettling warmth to it, but the chain was as cold as you'd expect from a thick piece of iron, and apparently hadn't taken on any of the heat. I didn't have any cupboards with enough space to hold the thing, so in the end I just dragged it into my living room and pushed it up against the wall, as out of the way as possible. I cut up the cardboard box it had been sealed in and put it with the rubbish outside. And just like that I had, apparently, started storing a coffin

in my home.

At the time I think I assumed it was full of drugs, at least as far as I assumed anything about the situation. Why anyone would store something in such a noticeable way or with a total stranger like me, these weren't questions I could even guess at an answer to, but I decided it was best to think about it as little as possible. For the next few days I avoided my living room, as I found being so close to the thing made me nervous. I was also staying alert for the smell of any sort of rot, which might indicate there was something dead inside the coffin after all. I never smelled anything, though, and as the days passed I found myself noticing my mysterious charge less and less.

About a week after it arrived, I finally started using my living room again. I'd watch TV, mostly, and keep half an eye on the unmoving casket. At one point I got so cocky as to actually use it as a table. I was drinking a glass of orange juice at the time and absent-mindedly placed it on top of the lid, not really realising exactly what I had done. At least not until I heard movement from underneath it. I froze, listening intently and staring, willing myself to have been imagining things. But then it came again – a soft but insistent scratching, just below where I had placed my glass. It was slow and deliberate and caused gentle ripples to spread across the surface of my juice.

Needless to say I was terrified. More than that, I was confused. The coffin had been lying in my living room, chained and unmoving, for well over a week at this point. If there had been anything living in

there when it was delivered, it seemed unlikely it would still be alive. And why hadn't it made any sound before if there was something in there capable of movement? I gently picked up my glass and immediately the scratching stopped. I waited for some time, considering my options, before I placed it back down on the other end of the lid. It took about four seconds for the scratching to start up again, now more insistently.

When I took the glass away this time, it didn't stop for another five minutes. I decided against doing any further experiments, and instead made the very deliberate decision to ignore it. I felt at that point I either needed to use the heavy iron key to open it and see for myself what was in there, or follow the gouged instruction and resolve myself to never look inside. Some might call me a coward, but I decided on the latter, that I would interact with it as little as possible while it lived in my house. Well, I guess "lived" may be the wrong term.

I knew I'd made the right decision the next time it rained, and I heard the box begin to moan. It was a Saturday, and I was spending the day staying in and doing some light reading. I had few friends in Bournemouth, something about having a mysterious coffin lying in my living room made me reluctant to make the sort of connections that might lead to people coming round, and so I spent most of my free time alone.

I didn't watch a lot of television even before my living room was taken over with storing this thing, and so I now found myself sat in my room reading quite a lot. I remember I had just started Michael

Crichton's *The Lost World* at the time, and it started raining outside. It was a hard, heavy rain, the sort that falls straight down with no wind to disturb it, until everything is dark and wet. It was barely past midday, but I remember the sky was so overcast and gloomy that I had to get up to turn on the light. And that was when I heard it.

It was a low, gentle sound. I've seen *Dawn of the Dead*, I know what the groans of the undead are meant to sound like, but it wasn't that at all. It was almost… melodious. It sounded almost like singing, if it was muffled by twenty feet of hard-packed soil. At first I thought it might have been coming from one of the other flats in my building, but as it went on, and the hairs on my arms began to stand on end I knew, I just *knew*, where it was coming from. I walked to the living room and stood in the doorway, watching as the sealed wooden box continued to moan its soft, musical sound out at the rain.

There was nothing to be done. I'd made my decision not to open it, and this certainly did *not* make me want to reconsider that. So I just went back to my bedroom, put on some music and turned it up loud enough to drown out the sounds.

And so it continued for a few months. Whatever was in the casket would scratch at anything placed on top of it and moan whenever it rained, and that was that. I suppose it goes to show that you can get used to anything if you have to, no matter how bizarre. I occasionally considered trying to get rid of it, or finding people like you guys to investigate, but in the end I decided that I was actually

more afraid of whoever was responsible for entrusting me with the coffin than I was of the actual coffin itself. So I kept it secret.

The only thing that worried me was sleeping. I think it gave me bad dreams. I don't remember my dreams, never have, and if I was getting nightmares, they were no different – I didn't remember them and I certainly don't now. But I know I kept waking up in a panic, clutching at my throat and struggling to breathe. I also started sleepwalking. The first time that happened it was the cold that woke me up. It was the middle of winter and I tend not to keep the heating on when I'm asleep. It took me a few seconds to fully process where I was. I was standing in the dark, in my living room, over the coffin. What concerned me more about the situation was the fact that, when I awoke, I seemed to be holding the key to it in my hand.

Obviously this worried me. I even went to my GP about it, who referred me to the sleep clinic at the nearby hospital, but the problems never recurred in a clinical setting. I decided to hide the key in more and more difficult to access places, but still I kept waking up with it, and I was starting to panic. When I awoke one morning to find I'd actually placed the key within the lock and was, as far as I could tell, moments from opening it, I knew I had to find a solution.

In the end, what I took to doing was perhaps a bit elaborate, but it seemed to work: I would place the key within a bowl of water and then put it in the freezer, encasing it in a solid block of ice. I still sometimes found myself trying to get to the key in my sleep, but the

chill of the ice always woke me up long before I could do anything with it. And in the end it just became yet another part of my routine.

I lived like that for almost a year and a half. It's funny how fear can just become as routine as hunger – at a certain point I just accepted it. My first clue that my time keeping the coffin was coming to an end was when it began to rain and there was silence.

I didn't notice at first, as my habit at that point had been to put on the music as soon as the weather began to turn, but after a few minutes, I realised that there wasn't anything to drown out. I turned off my music and went to check. The living room was silent. Then came a knock at the door. The sound was light and unobtrusive but it rang out like thunder in the quiet flat. I knew what I'd see as soon as I opened the door, and I was right. John and the two delivery men stood there.

I wasn't surprised to see them, as I say, but they actually seemed quite surprised to see me. John had to take a second to look me up and down, almost in disbelief, as I asked if they'd come to collect their coffin.

He said that they had, and he hoped it hadn't been too much trouble. I told him where he could stick it, and he didn't seem to have an answer for that. He did seem genuinely impressed, however, when I got the key out of the freezer. I didn't even try to thaw it – I was so eager to have this thing out of my life that I just dropped the bowl of ice on the floor and shattered it. I watched as

John picked the icy key off the floor and I told them it was in the living room.

I didn't follow them. I didn't want to see what they did with the coffin. I didn't want to see if they opened it. And when the screaming started, I didn't want to see who was screaming or why. I only left the kitchen when the two delivery men carried the coffin past the door. I followed them down the stairs, and watched in the pouring rain as they locked it into a small van marked "Breekon and Hope Deliveries". Then they drove away. There was no sign of John.

That was the last I heard of it. I got a new job and moved to London shortly afterwards, and now I just try not to think about it too much.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

It's always nice to hear that my hometown is not entirely devoid of odd occurrences and eerie stories. Ice cream, beaches and boredom are all very well, but I'm glad to hear Bournemouth has at least a few apparitions to call its own. That said, the fact is Mr. Gillespie's statement starts with drug use and continues on with the lack of corroborating witnesses being a central theme, which means that an eerie story is all that it is. When the Institute first investigated, it doesn't look like they were able to find a single piece of evidence to support the existence of this scratched coffin, and to be honest I

didn't think it was worth wasting anyone's time over now, nearly twenty years later.

That said, I did mention it to Tim yesterday, and apparently he did some digging of his own. Breekon and Hope did, in fact, exist, and were a courier service that operated until 2009, when they went into liquidation. They were based in Nottingham, however, significantly north of Bournemouth, and if they kept records of their deliveries, they are no longer available.

What is interesting, however, is the address Mr. Gillespie provided for the flat this all took place in. The housing association that ran it does keep extensive records on the tenants that have lived in their buildings going back some forty or fifty years. From what Tim could find, it appears that for the two years of his residence, Mr. Gillespie was the only person living in that entire building, with the other seven flats being utterly vacant. Nobody moved in following his departure, and the building was sold to a developer and demolished shortly after this statement was originally given.

Predictably, no-one who worked for that housing association in the 90s is still there, and despite Tim's best efforts, we could get no explanation for why, in a building of that size, Mr. Gillespie spent almost two years living alone, save for an old wooden coffin.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG003 – Across the Street

Statement #0070107

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Amy Patel, regarding the alleged disappearance of her acquaintance Graham Folger. Original statement given July 1st, 2007. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I first met Graham two years ago, more or less. It's hard to say exactly when we first met or even started talking, as we were taking a class together at the time. I'm sure there was plenty of discussion or interaction before we learned each other's names, but I started my course in September of 2005, so yeah, about two years. I had decided to take a Criminology course at Birkbeck University as a way of getting out of the rut with my office job – I'm an Associate Compliance Analyst at Deloitte, and if you think that sounds boring, well… yeah. It is. I knew a night course in Criminology wasn't going to go anywhere, of course, even if I'd finished it. I just had to

do something to find a bit of interest in my life, and it was either that or become an alcoholic, so…

Sorry, I'm going off topic. I initially found Graham a bit off-putting, to be honest. He was a chain smoker and wore far too much deodorant to try and cover the smell. He was a bit older than me, maybe ten years or so. I never asked his age, I mean, we weren't *that* close, but he was starting to grey at the edges of his hair, and you could see that the tiredness on his face wasn't just from missing a single night's sleep. That's not to say he was bad looking – he had a round, open sort of face and quite deep blue eyes, but very much not my type. He was well-spoken in group work, at least when he did speak, and I think it came up once that he'd been to Oxford, though I don't know what college.

I'd noticed earlier that during lectures he always seemed to be scribbling furiously in a notebook even when the lecturer wasn't speaking. At first, I just thought he was thorough, but I swear I watched him fill a whole A5 notebook in one lecture. I remember it was a talk on youth and the justice system where the speaker was so slow that it wouldn't have filled that book even if Graham had been writing down literally every word. Not to mention I asked to borrow his notes once for an essay, and he gave me this weird look and said he didn't take any notes.

So yeah, point is, I wouldn't have called him a friend, but we got on alright. It was about four months into my course that I first encountered Graham outside of the university. I was riding the night bus home, having gone for a couple of drinks and missed the

regular service. I live in Clapham, so there's a pretty regular night bus service headed there. Of course, regular also means drunken angry vomiters, so yeah, I generally try to be unobtrusive, sitting in a seat at the back of the top floor.

It was there that I saw Graham. He was sat right at the front, staring out of the window. People-watching is one of my guilty pleasures, so I decided not to say hello, at least not right away. I wasn't disappointed, either – he was stranger alone than he had ever been during class.

It was the middle of winter at this point, so the windows were solid with condensation, but he almost obsessively wiped it away from the one in front of him the moment it started to obscure his view. He seemed to be intently scanning the street for something, except that at times he would crane his neck to stare at the roofs of the buildings passing by. He seemed nervous, as well, and was breathing way faster than normal, which fogged up his window even more. It was slightly alarming to watch, to be honest, and I finally made up my mind to tell him I was there.

He jumped a bit when I greeted him, and I asked him if he was alright. He told me he didn't usually stay out so late and found nighttime public transport unsettling. I sat next to him, and he seemed to get much more relaxed, so I didn't push the issue.

We talked for awhile about nothing in particular, until the bus started to approach my stop. As I rose, I noticed that Graham had stood up at the exact same time as I had, and I realised with some

discomfort that we must live at the same stop. I liked the guy fine, don't get me wrong, but I still didn't really feel ok with him knowing where I lived. But yeah, it was obvious that I'd gotten up to get off the bus, so I couldn't really ride on to the next stop, and it wasn't even that I felt unsafe with Graham, I'm just a private person.

I decided to just walk back with him as far as necessary and make sure he didn't see what building I went into. Maybe we weren't even walking in the same direction. Yeah, we were walking in exactly the same direction. We even seemed to be heading to the same street.

It was at that point I felt a hand grab my shoulder and throw me into the road. I don't know how else to describe it, one moment I was walking along, the next I was flying towards the ground. It can't have been Graham – he was in front of me at the time, and I would have sworn there was nobody else on the street. There weren't any cars coming, but I hit my head hard. I think I must have been unconscious for a few seconds, because the next thing I remember is a panicky Graham on the phone to an ambulance. I tried to tell him I was alright, but didn't really manage to get the words out, which, yeah, probably meant I wasn't alright.

The ambulance arrived in pretty good time, considering it was London on a Friday night, and the paramedics gave me a look over. I was told that the injury itself wasn't serious – apparently head wounds always bleed that much and it's nothing to panic about – but that I did have quite a nasty concussion and shouldn't be left

alone for the next few hours.

Even though we were within sight of my door, I had for some reason settled upon the idea of Graham never knowing where I lived. In retrospect this was likely the concussion talking, but the upshot was I agreed to go back to Graham's flat to recover. He was quite awkward about the whole thing, and took great pains to assure me that there was nothing untoward about the situation; apparently he was a gay, which I'll admit did actually reassure me a bit. Still, it was clear this wasn't how either of us had hoped to be ending our nights.

As it turned out, Graham's flat was directly across the street from mine, just a couple of floors lower. I wondered if I could see my window from his, and I remember I had the odd thought that, if I had to look out, I'd need to be careful of his window box, as I could see the hooks attaching it to the frame. I asked him what he grew, and he gave me a look, as though my concussion had stopped me making sense again. I mean, maybe it had, because when I looked back at the window the hooks were gone, and there was no sign of any window box. At the time I put it down to my head wound, and even now I'm not sure.

The flat itself was a simple affair, quite big by London standards. It had only a few pieces of furniture and a lot of bookshelves, each covered with rows and rows of identical notebooks, with no apparent marking system or indication of contents. I started to ask about them, but my head throbbed and I didn't feel up to any answer that might have been forthcoming.

Graham led me to the sofa and disappeared to fetch me an icepack and a mug of sugary tea. I graciously accepted both, though I wasn't in much of a mood to talk. Graham clearly felt awkward enough with the silence to do the talking for both of us, and I learned more about him over the next hour than I'd ever had a desire to know. Apparently his parents had died in a car accident a few years previously and had left a great deal of money and ownership of this flat. He didn't need to work anymore and so had found himself somewhat adrift, taking night college courses to pass the time and broaden his mind – his words, not mine. He said he was trying to figure out what to actually do with his life.

He talked on like this for a while but I stopped listening about that point, as I'd become enraptured by the table on which he'd placed my tea. It was an ornate wooden thing, with a snaking pattern of lines weaving their way around towards the centre. The pattern was hypnotic and shifted as I watched it, like an optical illusion. I found my eyes following the lines towards the middle of the table, where there was nothing but a small square hole. Graham noticed me staring, and told me that interesting antique furniture was one of his few true passions. Apparently he'd found the table in a second-hand shop during his student days and fallen in love with it. It had been in pretty bad shape but he'd spent a long time and a lot of money restoring it, though he'd never been able to figure out what was supposed to go in the centre. He assumed it was a separate piece and couldn't track it down.

And yeah, like most of his conversation, I'd have found it dull even

if I wasn't concussed. But by this time, I was beginning to feel well enough to leave, and started to make my excuses to Graham. He expressed his concern, said it hadn't been as long enough, as the medics suggested, but if I had to… Well, you get the picture. In the end I did leave, as I kept getting lost in the lines of the table, and the pipes outside of the window made such a weird noise that I didn't think staying was actually going to help me recover.

I went straight home, making sure Graham couldn't see me from his window, and spent a few hours watching TV until I recovered enough to go to sleep. By the time I woke up the next morning I was feeling more or less ok, though I kept a plaster on the cut on my forehead, and tried not to think too much about the previous night.

One evening a few days later, though, I found myself staring out of my window, the one that faced the street, and I remembered how close Graham lived. I looked to see if I could figure out which window was his and, yeah, sure enough, there it was. It was actually a remarkably clear view of his flat, and I could see him sat on the sofa, reading one of the notebooks from his bookshelves. I realised that if I could see him so clearly, he could likely see me just as well if he chose to look up, and, with some remnant of my apprehension from that Friday, I decided to turn off the light in my flat, so he wouldn't see me if he looked up. And then, I went back to watching him.

Yeah, I know that sounds creepy. It really wasn't meant to be. I said earlier that I really enjoy people-watching and, regardless of how

boring he may have been to speak to, Graham was weirdly compelling to watch. So that's just what I did. And not just that night, either. Yeah, there's no non-sinister way to say that watching Graham became my hobby. It was strange, I'll admit it. But I just couldn't stop myself. I reasoned I wasn't watching him with any purpose or malice in mind. It was purely out of a detached interest in his life. And in my defence, I would have stopped a lot sooner if it hadn't been for the bizarre things he would do. He would constantly reorder his journals, without any apparent system of organisation, most of the time without even opening them. Sometimes he would grab an apparently random notebook from the shelves and start scribbling in it, even though I could see that the page was already covered in writing.

Once, and I swear this is true, I saw him take one of his notebooks and start to tear out the pages one at a time. And then, slowly and deliberately, he ate them. It must have taken him three hours to get through the whole book, but he didn't stop or pause, he just kept going.

Even when he wasn't doing anything with the notebooks, there was an odd energy to him. From what I could see he was constantly on edge, and jumped every time any loud noise passed on the street below. A police siren, a breaking bottle, hell, I even saw him freak out over an ice-cream truck once. Each time he'd leap to his feet, run to the window and start looking out; wildly craning his neck from side to side. Sometimes he'd look up, but I'd learned his patterns well enough to avoid being spotted. Then, all at once, he'd

decide that there was no problem and go back to whatever he was doing before.

And by “whatever he was doing before”, yeah, I mean *nothing*. He apparently didn’t have a television or a computer – the only books he seemed to own were his own notebooks, and I only ever saw him eat takeaway food. I don’t know how many times I watched him eat the same pizza – pepperoni with jalapeño peppers and anchovies. Yeah, I know. But the rest of the time he just sat there, smoking; sometimes looking into space, sometimes staring at that wooden table of his. And yeah, I remembered the pattern was kind of hypnotic and I spent more than a couple of minutes staring at it myself when I was there, but he did almost nothing else.

Who knows, perhaps he had a rich and fulfilling life outside of the flat. He certainly left it regularly enough, and yeah, I wasn’t so far gone as to actually follow him. In fact, I always waited a good long while before leaving my own building to make sure I didn’t bump into him. I still didn’t want him to know where I lived, although now for very different reasons. In the end, though, it was a hobby, not an obsession, and often days would pass when I wouldn’t see Graham at all. Maybe there was stuff I missed that would have explained his behaviour. I just wish I’d missed what happened on April 7th. Then maybe I’d have just thought he’d moved on or… I don’t know. I just wish I hadn’t seen it.

Work had been intense for a couple of months, with so many late nights I’d had to drop out of my course. It was just as well, really, as I hadn’t actually spoken to Graham since the night I suffered my

head injury. I think he still felt awkward about it, and I'd seen him do so many weird things alone in his flat that I think I'd have struggled to have a normal conversation with him. Anyway, this week I'd barely had time to eat, let alone do much in the way of Graham-watching, so when I got home at about half ten at night, my first thought was just to fall into bed. But it was Friday, and I'd drunk a huge amount of coffee to keep going at work, so yeah, I was wired and looking forward to a long lie-in the next day. So when I saw Graham's light was still on, I decided to spend a relaxing few minutes checking in on him.

His light may have been on, but I couldn't see him, and I wondered if perhaps he'd gone to bed and simply forgotten to turn it off. More likely he was just in the bathroom, so I decided to wait a while longer. As I stared at that window, I realised there was something… I don't know, *off* about it. It looked different somehow, but I couldn't figure out what it was.

Then I noticed it. At first, I'd just taken it to be a water pipe running down the side of the building, attached just below Graham's open window. The light from the streetlamps didn't reach up to his fourth floor flat, and the window ledge cast a shadow that stopped the light from the room illuminating it, but it was long, straight, dark, and from what I could see it just looked like a pipe, except I'd been watching that window for months now, and would have sworn that there had never been a pipe there before.

And as I stared at it, it moved. It started to bend, slowly, and I realised I was looking at an arm, a long, thin arm. As it bent the

joint close to where the arm ended, I think I saw another joint further down, also moving, and bending what I can only assume were elbows; it hooked the end of the limb over through the window. When I say moved, that's not quite right. It *shifted*. Like when you stare at one of those old magic eye paintings and you change from seeing one picture into seeing another.

I never saw anything I could actually call a hand, but still it pulled itself through his window. It took less than a second, and I didn't get a good look at what it was, I just saw these… arms, legs? At least four of them, but there might have been more, and they kind of folded themselves through the window in a flash of mottled grey. I think that was the colour – it was mostly a silhouette, and if there was a body or head, it shifted inside faster than I could see it. The moment it was inside, the light in Graham's flat went out, and the window slammed down behind it.

So yeah, I just kind of stood there for a long time, trying to process what I'd just seen. I could make out some vague movements from inside Graham's flat, but couldn't see anything clearly. I finally decided I had to phone the police, though I didn't have any idea what to tell them. In the end I simply said I'd seen someone suspicious climbing in through a fourth floor window at his address and hung up before they could ask me who was calling. Then I waited and watched the darkened flat opposite. I couldn't look away – I was convinced that if I stopped staring that… whatever the hell it was would fold itself back out, reach over and step into my home. Nothing came out.

About ten minutes later I saw a police car driving up the street. No sirens, no flashing lights, but they were here, and right away I started to feel better. Looking up, though, I saw the light had come on in Graham's flat. There was no sign of the thing I'd seen climb in, but as the police pressed the buzzer outside his building, I saw someone walking towards the door to let them in. It wasn't Graham.

I can't stress enough how much this was not Graham. He looked completely different. He was maybe a few inches shorter and had a long, square face topped with curly blond hair, where Graham's had been dark and cut short. He was dressed in Graham's clothes, though; I recognised the shirt from my months of watching, but he was *not* Graham. I watched as Not-Graham walked to the door and let the two police officers in. They talked for a while, and Not-Graham looked concerned and together they started to search the flat. I watched, waiting for the thing to emerge, or for them to find the real Graham, but they didn't.

At one point I saw one of the police pick up a dark red shape that I recognised as a passport. My heart beat faster as I saw her open it and look at Not-Graham, clearly comparing, waiting for the moment when she detected the impostor. But instead she just laughed, shook Not-Graham's hand, and they left.

I watched the police car drive away, feeling a sense of helplessness, and when I looked up, he was standing at Graham's window, looking back at me. I stood there frozen as his wide, staring eyes met mine and a cold, toothy smile spread across his face. Then in one swift motion he drew the curtains, and was gone.

I didn't sleep that night, and I never saw Graham again. I saw this new person, though, all the time. For the next week I'd see him taking out large, heavy-looking rubbish bags several times a day. It took me a while to realise he was disposing of Graham's old notebooks, but soon enough the flat was empty of them. I think he did other redecorating, but I never got a good look, as the only time he had his curtains open was when he was staring intently at my flat, which he now did every night. I tried to find evidence of the old Graham, but anything I could find online with a picture – it was always a picture of this new person. I even asked some of my old classmates, but none of them seemed to remember him at all.

Eventually I moved. I really liked my old place in Clapham, but yeah, it just got too much. The last straw was when I was leaving for work one morning, and didn't realise until too late that Not-Graham had left his building at the same time. He greeted me by name, and his voice was nothing like it should have been. I started to make my excuses and hurry away, but he just stared at me, and smiled.

"Isn't it funny, Amy, how you can live so near and never notice. I'll need to return the visit someday."

I moved out a week later, and I never saw him again.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

I'd be tempted to dismiss this as hallucination resulting from long-

term head trauma complications, but Tim came through with this one and managed to get hold of Ms. Patel's medical records. God knows how he got them, but he'd better not be using Institute funds to woo filing clerks again. The records just don't support the idea she was suffering those sorts of problems. Not to mention I usually trust co-worker testimony as far as I can burn it, but her job really doesn't seem like the sort you could do with a compromised sense of reality. Ms. Patel has refused our request for a follow-up interview and seems to be trying to distance herself from these events.

Graham Folger definitely existed, and appears to match up with her story. According to coroner's records, Desmond and Samantha Folger, his parents, died on the M1 near Sheffield on August 4th, 2001, and Graham Folger's name appears on the register of several colleges and universities in and around London over the next few years. The flat she mentioned did belong to Mr. Folger, but was sold through an agency in early 2007. All the photographs we've been able to source seem to match the description of this "Not-Graham" that Ms. Patel described, except for a few Polaroids, enclosed, which appear to be from the late 80s, and show the two parents alongside a dark-haired teenager who doesn't match the later photos at all.

There doesn't seem to be much more to be done here. Ms. Patel, like so many of our subjects, seems to have been more interested in giving her statement as a form of personal closure, rather than as the start of a serious investigation. She wasn't even interested when

Sasha told her we'd managed to locate what we believed to be one of Graham Folger's journals. Doubt it would have done much good. It just says the same thing on every page: the words "Keep Watching" over and over again.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG004 – Pageturner

Statement #0132806

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Dominic Swain, regarding a book briefly in his possession in the winter of 2012. Original statement given June 28th, 2013. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I work as a theatre technician in various venues around the West End; I mainly deal with lights, but a lot of the smaller venues can't afford large crews for their productions so you end up doing a little bit of everything. I guess that's not directly relevant to my experience but I just want you to know that I'm not some crazy person wandering in off the street. I work, I do practical things with my hands and I am not prone to crazed flights of fancy.

That day, I was going to see a matinee performance of *The Trojan Women* at The Gate Theatre, up in Notting Hill. A friend of mine, Katherine Mendes, was in it and had been trying to get me to come

to see it for a while. We'd worked together on a production of *The Seagull* a couple of years before and had had a bit of a thing going back then. At this point I had just become single, so was keen to meet up and see if any of the old spark remained. I ended up going along on the afternoon of Saturday the 10th of November – I remember the date exactly, as there had been a lot of back-and-forth about it, since we were both involved in separate shows at the time, making evenings difficult.

So, on Saturday afternoon I found myself in Notting Hill Gate, killing an hour or two before the show was due to start. Now, Notting Hill is not somewhere I go often, as it tends towards the pricey, even for London, and I'm not sure how much you know about theatre techs, but we're not generally an overpaid profession. Still, I had some vague memories of their being an Oxfam charity shop somewhere nearby, as I'd previously bought quite a nice old military tunic there which remains one of my favourite jackets. I found it without any problems, and spent ten minutes or so looking over the clothes and knickknacks, but was a bit disappointed. It was smaller than I remembered and just seemed to contain the same tedious curios as every other charity shop. I still had some time to kill, though, so I decided to have a look through their books, something I rarely bother doing usually.

I found the book on the Science Fiction and Fantasy shelf. At first I assumed it was some sort of faux-leather special edition and I was sure whoever put it out for sale must have done the same, because the price on it was only four pounds. There was something about it

that made me take another look, though, and picking it up I felt the binding and realised it might well have been bound in real leather, probably calf, given how soft it was. I'm not an expert on books, by any means, but it seemed old, and I thought it might have been hand-bound as the pages were slightly uneven.

There was no dust wrapper on it and the front had no title, but embossed on the spine in faded gold letters were the words *Ex Altiora*. I did some Latin in school when I was a child, but I haven't had much cause to use it since, so you'll have to forgive me if my translations don't make much sense, but I believe it meant "From Higher" or "Out of the Heights".

I was astounded, to say the least – the book was clearly worth far more than it was being sold for. If the shop clerk who put it out had been paying any attention it would have been in the glass case where they kept those things people donated that were actually valuable. I had a flick through but it seemed to be entirely written in Latin, so I didn't have much luck discerning what it was about. The only English seemed to be a bookplate at the front that read "From the library of Jurgen Leitner," although no author was listed.

There were also several black and white illustrations – woodcuts I think – each showing a mountain or a cliff or in one picture what appeared to be an empty night sky. I felt an odd sensation when I looked at that image as though, simple as it was, I was about to fall into it, and my stomach gave an odd jolt, almost causing me to drop the book in the middle of Oxfam.

I made up my mind to buy it. Even if I never figured out how to read the thing, it was clearly worth a lot more than they were selling it for. I felt like a bit of an arse for not letting them know how valuable it was, almost like I was stealing money from the charity, but in the end I realised that it wasn't my job to set the prices in this shop and besides, this book absolutely fascinated me. The woman working the till didn't even raise an eyebrow when I brought it over and paid my four pounds. I headed out, hoping to find a café where I could sit and have another look through, but it was then that I noticed the time. I had somehow managed to spend an hour in that shop, and now I was very nearly late for Katherine's play. I made it in time, luckily, though I had to run a bit.

The show was fine. I've never been a particular fan of Greek plays, and this interpretation was not the one to win me round to them. Katherine was excellent, of course, but the rest of the show was quite frankly a bit pedestrian. Still, I'm not a theatre critic, and I wasn't exactly paying it my full attention, as I was convinced there was a problem with the stage lights. Throughout the show I kept getting the faintest smell of ozone and was worried. The only other time I'd smelled that in the theatre was when one of my stage hands had accidentally ordered the wrong sort of light and we'd ended up installing a projector with a xenon-mercury lamp – the sort used to sterilise medical equipment with UV. I spotted the issue before anything happened, but I still remember that intense ozone smell. Still, no-one else seemed to notice it and I couldn't see anything in their light set-up that would have caused the odour, so I tried my best to ignore it.

After the performance was finished, Katherine and I grabbed a quick dinner before heading to our respective evening shows. I was disappointed to discover that whatever attraction there had been between us seemed to have vanished completely, and while we spent a pleasant enough couple of hours together it was obvious that neither of us wanted to take it any further. I did show her the book, though. She knew even less Latin than I did, but was impressed. She said it looked valuable and that I should take it somewhere to be appraised, although she didn't look through it in any detail, as the pictures triggered her vertigo for some reason.

Nothing of note occurred after I left. I did my show, a production of *Much Ado About Nothing* down at the Courtyard Theatre, with no problems. I returned home late, having gone for a drink with the stage manager and a couple of the actors, and felt far too awake to just go to bed, so I poured myself a small gin and tonic and decided to look through this book in more detail. Oddly enough, I somehow hadn't learned any more Latin since I bought it twelve hours before, so reading it was still out of the question, but I went through and had a closer look at those woodcuts. There were about a dozen that I found, mostly mountains and cliffs but one appeared to be a tower, looming over the surrounding countryside at an odd angle, with tiny birds just visible circling the summit.

And then there was that picture of an empty sky. I've never had any fear of heights, but staring at that picture I felt… I don't know, really. I just couldn't look at it for too long. It seemed to open forever, nothing to do but fall into it. It was even stranger as there

wasn't much to the picture itself except for black ink and a few stylised stars, but something in the proportions just had that effect on me.

I decided that maybe Katherine had been right, and it might be valuable as an antique, so I did some research to try and find out more about it. Latin fell out of favour as a language for academic texts in the 18th Century and I really doubted the thing was that old. Since then it was only really used for religious texts but the book certainly didn't look like it was full of prayers. Searching *Ex Altiora* online didn't do much good – the phrase was used in a few old prayers, there was a company called Altiora and something in Italian about football, but nothing that looked even remotely like it related to my book.

Searching for Jurgen Leitner wasn't much better. It brought up an entry for an Austrian musician and a few Facebook pages, although they all seemed to have umlauts in their names, unlike the one in the book, and none of them looked like the sorts to have a library full of strange Latin texts. The only thing I found that looked even remotely relevant was a listing on eBay from 2007. The auction was titled "Key of Solomon 1863 owned by MacGregor Mathers and Jurgen Leitner" and had been won for just over £1200 by a deactivated user – grbookworm1818. There was no picture or description – just the title and the winning bid. I decided to call it a night and go to bed. I think I had a nightmare, but I don't remember the details.

I slept in very late the next day and by the time I awoke there

wasn't much daylight left, but I spent the hours until my show contacting book dealers that I'd looked up online. All of them put the book's age between 100 and 150 years, and said it looked like it had been custom-bound. Most offered to buy it off me for a few hundred pounds, but at this point I was more interested in information about it. Unfortunately, none of them had heard of it before, or seemed at all familiar with its contents.

The last seller I went to did recognise the name Jurgen Leitner, though. She told me Leitner had been a big name in the literary scene during the 1990s; some rich Scandinavian recluse paying absurd amounts of money for whatever books took his fancy. It was said he'd often have books custom-bound after providing a manuscript, or even commission authors to produce works to his brief – although she didn't actually know any writers who had worked with Leitner. He dropped from public view sometime around '95, but she recalled he used to have extensive dealings with Pinhole Books down in Morden, and gave me the details for Mary Keay, who owned it.

I went and I did my show after that, the last night of the run, in point of fact, but though I didn't miss a single lighting cue, all through it I just couldn't take my mind off the book. I felt as though there was something I was missing, just beyond my grasp. And all throughout I could detect that same faint smell of ozone. Or was it ozone? There was something else there, something I knew but could not remember. Every time I felt I was close, I was overcome with a dizziness and nausea that threatened to topple me over.

I skipped the cast party afterwards, instead going for a long walk to "clear my head" in the cold November air. I don't know how long I walked for. It must have been hours, but it felt right, like it was all I could do. Walking felt as natural as falling. It was only when a man shouted at me for almost walking into him that I stopped and took stock of my surroundings. I had no idea where I was. I took out my phone to find the nearest station and saw that I was only a street away from Morden.

I felt dizzy all of a sudden, and when I looked at the building I was stood in front of, I was not in the least bit surprised to see a brass plaque reading "Pinhole Books – By Appointment Only" next to an unmarked door of dark-stained wood. I rang the doorbell and waited.

The woman who opened the door wasn't at all what I was expecting. She was very old and painfully thin, but her head was completely clean shaven, and every square inch of skin I could see was tattooed over with closely-written words in a script I didn't recognise. She stood at the bottom of a flight of stairs, and from the top I could hear the sound of death metal blaring out of some powerful speakers. I wondered for a moment if she got complaints from the neighbours, playing it so loudly at two o'clock in the morning, and realised with a start that it was actually two o'clock in the morning. I apologised for disturbing her so late and asked if she was Mary Keay. She just snorted and asked in a decidedly unfriendly manner if I had an appointment.

I reached into my bag and pulled out *Ex Altiora*, opening it to show

Leitner's name on the bookplate. At this her eyes seemed to light up, and she turned around to walk up the stairs. She didn't shut the door behind her, so I took this as an invitation and followed her up.

We entered a cramped set of rooms, with books piled high in every conceivable corner, almost to a point where I had to be careful following her through the labyrinth, so as not to take a wrong turn. She was talking, I realised, and didn't seem to care if I heard her over the music or not. She said it had been a long time since she'd found a Leitner, although "her Gerard" kept an eye out. She gave no elaboration as to who her Gerard might have been. This strange old woman didn't seem interested in actually reading or looking at my book in depth, but asked instead if I wanted to see hers. I just nodded. I was out of my depth here, but I had no idea what in. I just knew that I hadn't smelled ozone since I arrived.

I followed Mary Keay into a dingy study. It was small to begin with, but every wall was completely covered with packed bookshelves, crowding even further into the space. Immediately my host began to scan them intently, muttering to herself about where "he" would have put it. I stood there awkwardly, not wanting to stare at the old woman, but also hesitant to do anything else.

Aside from the bookshelves, there was little in the room other than a worn desk with a very old-looking chair behind it. The desk was covered with papers, as well as fishing wire and a safety razor. I think it says something about my state of mind at this point that I didn't even give those items a second thought at the time.

Instead, my attention was fixed on a picture attached to the one small area of wall not covered by bookshelves. It was a painting of an eye. Very detailed, and at first I almost would have said almost photorealistic, but the more I looked at it, the more I saw the patterns and symmetries that formed into a single image, until I was so focused on them that I started to have difficulty seeing the eye itself.

Written below it were three lines, in fine green calligraphy: “Grant us the sight that we may not know. Grant us the scent that we may not catch. Grant us the sound that we may not call.”

At this point Mary Keay returned with two cups of tea. I hadn’t even noticed her leave nor had I requested the cup of black tea she pressed into my hand. She asked if I liked the painting and told me that her Gerard had done it. Said he was a very talented artist. I mumbled something approving, I don’t remember exactly what, and looked at the cup of tea in my hand. She hadn’t offered me any milk, and was now busily searching the shelves again, her own cup forgotten on the desk. I tried to drink the stuff out of politeness, but it tasted foul, like dust and smoke. I think it might have once been lapsang souchong, but if so it must have been years old.

Finally, Mary seemed to find the book she was looking for and took it from the shelf. She handed me a book that, at first glance, appeared to be almost identical to my copy of *Ex Altiora*, except that the leather was in slightly better condition. There was no title on this one, but opening it I could see that it was written in letters I didn’t recognise. There were no illustrations in this book, and the

only English words I could find were on the bookplate: “From the library of Jurgen Leitner”. Just like mine. Mary told me that the writing was in Sanskrit, but when I asked her if she could read it she just started laughing.

She took the book back and walked over to the desk where the room’s single unshaded light bulb cast stark shadows across the floor. She very deliberately held the book in those shadows for a few seconds and then handed it back to me. I noticed for the first time that the heavy metal music was no longer playing, and the room was utterly silent.

I opened the book, and for a few seconds was confused to see that nothing seemed to have changed. The writing was still unintelligible to me and it felt no different. I lifted it to have a closer look, and as I did I heard something clatter lightly onto the floor. I looked down to see bones. Small animal bones, from what I can tell, but each one was slightly bent and warped into shapes that bones should not form.

As I stared at them, Mary Keay took the book back from me and passed it through the shadows once again. More bones fell. She did this several times, until there was a small pile formed at my feet.

I didn’t know what to say. By this point my head was pounding and the feel of this cramped, dark place with its old tea and ancient books was starting to overwhelm me. All I could think to ask was whether my book did that as well. Mary Keay laughed and told me to look for myself. I began to look through those pages. I hadn’t

passed it through any shadows, but I knew something had changed. The woodcuts were starker, somehow, and in the background of each there were new lines, thick and dark, stretching down from the sky. And then I came to the picture of that empty night, but now it had a stark, branching pattern carving through it. A pattern I recognised. My stomach dropped, as though the floor was gone and I was falling.

Struggling to stay standing, I muttered some excuse and went to leave. The ozone smell was back now, stronger than ever, and I had to get out. I fell down the stairs as I fled, badly bruising my hip and twisting my ankle painfully, but I didn't care. I limped from that place as quickly as I could and hailed a taxi to take me home, fingers still locked in a death-grip on my book.

The branching pattern I had seen in that picture is known as the Lichtenberg figure. It shows the diverging paths of electricity on an insulating material, such as glass or resin. I knew it from the pattern of scars on the back of my childhood friend, who had been struck by lightning because of me.

His name was Michael Crew, and we'd been 8 years old at the time, playing in a field near my grandmother's house. When the storm hit, Michael had said that we should go inside, but I wanted to keep playing in the rain. I said that to him, and he just sighed and told me alright. It was as he said these words that he was struck.

The sound when it happened was so loud that it drowned out his screams completely, but it was the smell that really stayed with me:

that powerful ozone smell, cut through with the scent of cooking meat. Michael survived, in the end, but the scar, that branching Lichtenberg scar, stayed with him for the rest of his life.

When I got home it took all of my concentration to get up the stairs, and when I finally made it onto my sofa I couldn't shake that feeling as though I was falling. The smell was so strong I could hardly breathe. I didn't look at the book, I just lay there. I felt as though I was waiting for something, but I had no idea what.

By the time the knock on the door finally came, I was almost feeling composed enough to answer. Almost. It still took me almost five minutes to work up the nerve to open it. The knock did not come again, but I was positive that whatever was on the other side had not gone away. I reached over, grasped the handle and pulled the door open.

Stood just over the threshold was a man in a long, dark leather coat. His hair was dyed an artificial black, and he had the unshaven look of someone who hadn't slept in a couple of days. I asked him if he was Gerard Keay. He said that he was, and told me he'd like to see my book. I nodded silently and he followed me inside, closing the door behind him.

I took out the book and placed it on the table. Gerard studied it for some time, but did not touch it. Finally, he nodded and offered to buy it from me for five thousand pounds. I almost laughed when he said that. I would have sold it for a fraction of the amount. I might even have given it away, if it wasn't for the feeling that that…

wouldn't count somehow. It's hard to explain. I didn't care what he planned to do with it, I just wanted to get rid of it, and so I agreed.

Gerard didn't seem exactly happy at the news. He just nodded gravely and headed towards the door, saying he'd need to get the money and return. I didn't try to stop him. He left, closing the door behind him and I was alone once again. The whole encounter lasted barely more than a minute.

I sat there, waiting in silence for him to return. It was awful, and I needed to find some way to distract myself from the creeping smell, so I decided to get out my computer and see what I could find out about Gerard and Mary Keay. Typing in their names I don't know what sort of thing it was that I expected to find, but it certainly wasn't a news article from 2008 about Mary Keay's murder.

Police had broken in late September, after neighbours complained about the smell, and found her lying dead in the study. Cause of death was apparently determined to be an overdose of painkillers, but it was judged a murder due to "extensive post-mortem mutilation of the body". Large pieces of her skin had been peeled away, and hung up to dry on fishing wire, all around the room.

The article had a picture of Mary Keay, and there was no question that it was the same old woman that I had met in Morden, although in the photograph she seemed to have a full head of hair and lacked any visible tattoos.

I frantically started searching for any other information I could find.

Other news stories covered Gerard's trial for his mother's murder. Apparently he had been acquitted after a significant piece of evidence was deemed inadmissible, although none of the reports seemed to know what exactly that evidence was. It was at this moment the knocking came again. Gerard had returned.

I opened the door. I thought briefly about not letting him in, but I knew he'd wait there as long as he needed to, and I couldn't think for the reek of ozone that penetrated every one of my senses. I could not hide the terror on my face as he entered, but if he noticed the change in my demeanour then he didn't react to it. He simply handed me an envelope filled with cash. I didn't even bother to count it before handing him the book. He looked at the title, then flicked through it very quickly, before laughing, just once and nodding, apparently to himself, as though he'd just come to some sort of decision.

I had expected Gerard to leave immediately, but instead he walked over to my metal waste paper basket and placed the book inside. He reached into his jacket pocket, and pulled out a bottle of lighter fluid and a box of matches. Within a few seconds the book was ablaze, and the smell vanished almost immediately. Even as my head began to clear, I felt like I had to ask him why, but he just shook his head.

"My mother doesn't always know what's best for our family." That was all he said before picking up the waste paper bin, now full of gently smouldering ashes. I warned him it would be too hot to hold, but he shrugged and said he'd had worse. Then Gerard Keay left,

and I never saw him or the book again.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

If I never hear the name Jurgen Leitner again it will be too soon. I suppose it was too much to hope that we'd finally dealt with all that remained of his library after the incident in 1994, but it would have been useful if Gertrude had at least thought to add this statement to the current project file. Who knows how many other statements are in here that might deal with his books, or other currently active Institute projects?

If my luck thus far is anything to go by, then I'd say it is unlikely this was an isolated example. The more I discover about this archive, the more it seems Gertrude simply took the written statements and threw them into these files without even reading them. Given that she was Head Archivist for over fifty years, then that is… This might be a bigger job than I originally thought.

Regardless, most of the verifiable details in Mr. Swain's account seem to match up with our own researches. Martin couldn't find any records of *Ex Altiora* as a title in existent catalogues of esoteric or similar literature, so I assigned Sasha to double-check. Still nothing. Is it possible Mr. Swain got the title wrong? It seems unlikely, given the simplicity of it, and the… occurrences he describes certainly sound like they could have been due to the proximity of a true Leitner tome. Still, all the other books from his

library have been custom editions of known texts on dæmonology or the arcane. If there are Leitners out there that we haven't even heard of, I fear that may be cause for some small alarm.

Useful details for follow-up are few and far between, however. Donation records at the Oxfam charity shop in Notting Hill Gate only have anonymous donations listed for books in October/ November 2012, and obviously none of the staff recall the book. We've also been unable to locate Gerard Keay at all. Aside from this encounter, he seems to have almost entirely disappeared following the end of his trial.

The description Mr. Swain gives does appear to match file photos of Gerard and Mary Keay, and from his description it sounds like he did find his way to what used to be Pinhole Books in Morden, although it has been closed since 2008 for obvious reasons, and no new tenants moved in until 2014.

There was one interesting thing Tim found out, though, in the official police report on Mary Keay's death – apparently, the drying sheets of skin had been written over in permanent marker. There was no transcription or translation of it in the report but the language was identified to be Sanskrit.

So it doesn't appear that we have any concrete leads to go on. Still, I will be bringing this up with Elias and recommending that the search for any other missed books from the Leitner library be made this Institute's highest priority. Jurgen Leitner has done the world enough harm and we must pursue all available avenues to ensure

that he does no more.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG005 – Thrown Away

Statement #0092302

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Kieran Woodward, regarding items recovered from the refuse of 93 Lancaster Road, Walthamstow. Original statement given February 23rd, 2009. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I work as a bin man for Waltham Forest Council. It's not a bad job, really, as long as you can handle the smell and the early mornings, not to mention that when winter really gets going it can be pretty unpleasant. I've had to chip ice off more than a few bins in my time, just to get them open. Still, the pay's pretty decent; at least it is once you throw in the overtime and the bonuses, and once you've done the rounds you're usually off for the day, so you're working fewer hours than your average office monkey; it's just that those hours tend to be a lot less pleasant than anything you're likely to find staring at some accounting spreadsheet.

But I didn't come here to talk about the benefits and problems of working in waste collection. At least, I guess I came to talk about one very specific problem that I encountered last year, when doing the rubbish collection for 93 Lancaster Road.

Now, you encounter weird things in this job all the time. People have an odd mental block – this idea that as soon as they put something in the bin it's gone. It's officially been made rubbish and no-one will ever see it again. The fact that someone had to take it from your bin to the landfill or the recycling centre doesn't really enter their heads, and nobody ever seems to realise that up to a dozen people might be seeing what you throw away before it finally disappears forever. But no, as far as the rest of the world thinks about it, once it's been thrown away, it's gone, far beyond all human understanding.

This leaves those of us who work in waste collection seeing kind of a strange side to humanity, but an honest one at that. If you're a bit of a boozer, there's every chance that your bin men know how much you drink better than you do, because we empty all the bottles. And yes, we do remember, and we also get quite judgemental at times, although not about the things you might think – you can throw away a mountain of grotesque porn and, as long as you've tied it into neat bundles, we're fine with it, but if you throw away cat litter without properly bagging that, you'd better believe that you've earned the hatred of every bin man that ever slung a sack. Still, I'm getting off topic.

Point is, the bag of dolls' heads didn't bother me. I mean, it was

freaky, don't get me wrong – hundreds of small plastic heads, staring out of the refuse sack at me, but aside from a slight rip on the side of the black bag, they were thrown away very neatly, and were easy enough to toss into the truck.

The bag was full of them, mind. It was placed next to the green recycling bin and at first I thought that it was just a single doll with its head positioned near the tear, but when I tossed the bag into the truck the rip split, spilling forth a whole bunch of the things. At a guess I'd say there were over a hundred in there. They were made of hard, rigid plastic with that infant doll face that you seem to find on every toy like that.

Several of them had different hair moulded or painted on, so it was clear that they weren't simply from a hundred or so of the same doll. Someone had spent time acquiring a whole variety of different dolls, which they then beheaded and stuffed into the sack. They were very battered, but not with age – it looked as though someone had taken the brand new heads and dragged them over rough concrete, though I couldn't say whether they'd have been attached to the rest of the doll at the time.

It was creepy, sure, but the sun was shining and there were four of us working the truck that day, so it was easy enough to laugh it off. It was the old crew – me, David Atayah, Matthew Wilkinson, and Alan Parfitt, who drives – drove – the truck.

What it did do, though, was mark out 93 Lancaster Road in our minds as "the Doll House", since we spent the rest of the day

making off-colour jokes about the sort of people who must live there. I said before that your bin man knows a lot about you. Now, that's probably not actually true for most people – we service hundreds of homes each day and who can keep track of that many people? Who wants to?

You do have houses, though, that you learn to keep an eye on; the sort of places that throw out strange or sometimes even dangerous things. Like I said, we probably know if you're an alcoholic, but it's not because we watch you obsessively or care about your health. It's because smashed bottles and broken glass are dangerous and you learn to keep an eye out around houses where you're likely to find them. I read once that waste collection is the second most dangerous profession in England. Not sure I believe it – they said the first was farming – but you do see your fair share of injuries, so you learn to keep your eyes peeled and mark out in your mind which houses you want to stay wary of.

Now, after that, the Doll House became one of those houses for our crew. Not so much for any known danger, but when someone throws out a bin full of weird stuff like that, you never know what else they might decide to toss. Also, Alan, well, he had kind of a twisted sense of humour, and he loved the doll heads. When we told him, he insisted on stopping the truck and getting out to have a look, so after that, he always made a point to ask us to keep an eye on 93.

And we did. The next couple of weeks, when we pulled up to 93, I took an extra second or two just to check for anything strange in

the bins, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Alan especially was disappointed by this but it was hardly something to dwell on, so we put it out of our minds and pressed on with the day's work. This continued for what must have been a few months, and the whole doll heads incident hadn't come up, except for a few interesting conversations at the recycling plant where, to be honest, I don't think anyone believed us, or if they did they'd immediately try to top it with their own story of bizarre finds.

It was the start of spring when we got the next strange bag from 93 Lancaster Road. Again, it was an unmarked black refuse bag placed next to the recycling bin. As soon as I saw it, I knew it was another one. The shape of it was too regular to be full of the normal assortment of rubbish. As I picked it up, I realised it was far too light as well. It seemed to weigh almost nothing, but was bulging with what sounded like a whole load of paper inside.

I gave the others a look and told them I thought we had another odd bag. David and Matt started discussing whether we should open it, as this one didn't seem to have a rip like the last one, and we were still talking it over when Alan came back to see what was taking us so long. He knew where we were, and you could see it in his eyes that he'd been hoping this was the reason for the delay. One look at his face and I knew that if we didn't open it, he would.

I looked up towards the house, checking for anyone watching, but 93 was right near the start of our route, so it was still very early in the morning and all the lights were off. There was no sign of movement so, very carefully, I opened the bag.

Inside was paper, as I expected. It seemed to be a single strip of thick white writing paper, maybe an inch wide. The paper was long, so long that it seemed like the whole bag was filled solely with this one piece of it, wrapped and curled and crumpled to fit inside. There was writing on it in another language, I think Latin.

Matt, who was raised Catholic and never shut up about it, said he recognised it and claimed that it was the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, written over and over again. He seemed pretty rattled about it, especially at the fact that at certain points the edges of the paper seemed to be slightly singed, as though it had been passed over a candle or a lighter. He even seemed hesitant about throwing it in with the rest of the garbage, but we didn't have anything else we could actually do with it, so into the truck it went.

Alan was smiling the rest of the shift, and there was a delight there that, quite frankly, had started to unsettle me a bit. As far as I was concerned this was a bit of a let-down after the dolls' heads, but the way the others had reacted put me on edge.

The third bag was the one that really changed things. It was a fortnight after the one with the prayer paper in it. As we approached 93, I noticed there was another bag sitting next to the bin. The others clearly noticed as well, as everyone went very quiet. The first two had been the only times there had been rubbish bags at the house that weren't in the actual bin itself, so there was little doubt in my mind that this was going to be more creepy trash. Alan turned the engine off as we pulled level with the house, and got out. Whatever was in this one, he was going to see it.

The bag bulged, just like the others, but had a bumpy sort of look to its surface. We all stared at it for several seconds, before I realised that the others were waiting for me to pick it up – I'd picked up the others, and apparently this was how it was done now. It almost felt like a ritual.

I walked over and lifted it off the ground. It was heavier than the last one, and as it moved it made a sound, like shifting sand or gravel, or maybe more of a rattle. I started to carry it towards my colleagues to open it, when I accidentally caught the bottom of it on the low brick wall at the end of the small front garden. Already filled almost to bursting, the bag tore open easily.

From the newly ripped hole, poured teeth. Hundreds, thousands of teeth; they came streaming down it a waterfall of white, cream and yellow, bouncing as they hit the pavement, and gradually forming a pile of astounding size. When the bag was finally empty, we just stood there in silence, staring at the mountain of teeth that now lay on the ground before us.

They looked like human teeth to me, but I wasn't exactly an expert and I sure as hell didn't want to check closer. Finally, David broke the silence by vomiting loudly into a nearby drain and I backed away from the grisly mound. Even Alan looked shaken by this – I suppose some things are disconcerting however grim your interests. We phoned the police.

That's something else that people always forget about garbage men – we're perfectly capable of calling the police if we see obviously

illegal stuff being thrown away. Usually we don't bother if it's just something small, but this… for this we phoned the police. They came in surprisingly good time and I reckon they were even more freaked out than we were.

One of them took our statements, while the other went up to the house itself to check on the occupants, and see if they knew anything about the teeth. As the officer knocked on the door, we all strained to get a better look at what greeted her. There was no way after all this we were going to pass up a chance to actually get a look at the residents of 93 Lancaster Road.

Eventually the door opened, and an old woman stood there, blinking in the early morning sunlight and clearly slightly alarmed to see the police. Needless to say, the old lady and her husband had no idea about any of the weird bags that had been appearing in their rubbish, and seemed properly upset when they were given the details. The police spent a good ten minutes doing their best to collect up all the teeth, and we were sent on our way. I have no idea what, if anything, the investigation turned up. Certainly I was never contacted by them again, and if any of the rest were, they didn't mention it.

And for a while, that was it. We kept an eye out whenever we were heading down Lancaster Road, but didn't encounter any further ominous garbage bags. I thought maybe the involvement of the police had scared off whoever was leaving them. Maybe the police had caught the culprit and just hadn't told us.

I did start to notice, though, that Alan wasn't doing well. He was often late to his shift, and when he finally got there he'd be exhausted and grumpy, snapping at everyone and rudely brushing off anyone asking about his health or how he was doing. He seemed even worse whenever we approached the end of Lancaster Road, sometimes speeding up the truck slightly so that we had to run to keep up. Eventually, after I tripped over the curb while hurrying and twisted my ankle, I confronted him, told him that whatever was going on with him, he could talk about it or get over it, but that he clearly needed to deal with something. He got very quiet, and said he'd been watching number 93 some nights. Said he wanted to see whoever was dropping this stuff off. That he had to know.

I don't know what I expected. Trouble at home, maybe, or depression, but this took me by surprise. I told him it was a really bad idea, that if the police were still investigating they were more than likely to pick *him* up as the culprit, and even if they didn't the old couple at 93 could just as easily get him arrested for harassment or stalking. Alan nodded along and agreed with me as I spoke, but I could see he wasn't listening. He just said again that he needed to know, told me he'd be careful, as though that was meant to reassure me. It didn't, but I could see I wasn't going to talk him out of it and we ended in an uncomfortable silence.

What I didn't say, is that I'd almost done the same thing myself once or twice. There was something about this, beyond anything else I'd encountered, that… I don't know. It drew me in almost as much as it disgusted me. Almost, but not enough to do anything,

and if I needed any further convincing that leaving it alone was the right decision, I only needed to look at Alan. As time went on, the bags under his eyes deepened, and I'd watch him down half a dozen energy drinks over the course of a morning, just to get through his shift.

I could have said something to our manager, but even then Alan was still my friend, and I didn't want to be the one to get him in any sort of trouble. Eventually, though, it came to a head anyway. Alan fell asleep at the wheel of the truck and drove it into a parked car. No-one was hurt and the truck was going too slowly to do any real damage but, at that point, it was enough to get him fired. We were sad to see him go, but to be honest, by the end of it he'd become quite unpleasant to be around and no-one shed any real tears over it. We got a new member on our crew, a kid named Guy Wardman, and life continued in relative peace. For a while, anyway.

Then, on the 8th of August last year, at nine minutes past two in the morning, I was woken up by a text message from Alan. It said "FOUND HIM". I texted him back immediately – What had he found? Was it whoever was leaving the bags? Had he brought another one? No response. I texted Alan again to ask if he was ok. I sent that text a lot of times, but never heard back. I tried phoning him, but nobody answered. As the minutes stretched to hours, the worry that had been growing in my gut settled into a grim certainty, and I knew that Alan was gone. I also knew that I had to go to 93 Lancaster Road and see for myself. I got my coat and

headed out into the night.

I walked slowly, with a kind of reluctance, so the sky was starting to get light by the time I arrived. I knew what I'd find when I got there, and I was right. There was no sign of Alan, or of whoever he might have seen. There was, however, a new rubbish bag sitting there in its usual place. It was full, and this time the top of it had been tied off with a dark green ribbon, arranged in a bow like an old-fashioned Christmas present. It bulged in much the same way as the last one.

I picked up the bag, which turned out to be quite light, and I took off the bow. Opening it, I saw shifting white and, for a second, I was sure it was more teeth. Looking closer, though, I saw the truth: packing peanuts. Polystyrene packing peanuts. Enough to fill the bag to capacity. I almost felt relieved until I realised there was something else in there, something making it heavier than a bag of polystyrene should be.

I closed my eyes and reached in, expecting to find something horrible inside. My hand closed instead around cold metal, and I drew out a fist-sized lump of… I think it must have been copper or bronze, and had been roughly carved into the shape of a heart, but like a real heart, not like a Valentine's one. It was cold to the touch, like it had just come out of a freezer, and it almost stuck to my skin. Engraved on the side was the name "Alan Parfitt", the letters carved in with machine-like precision. That was the last sign of Alan I ever found. As far as I'm aware he's never been seen since.

I gave the lump of metal to a friend of mine who works the medical waste run and owes me a favour. I asked him to throw it in with a shipment, as the medical incinerators burn hotter than any I have access to, and I figured that was my best shot at getting rid of it properly. I still work the Lancaster Road route, but since then there haven't been any more weird bags turning up at 93. Mostly I've just tried to forget about it.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

It's nice to have a statement where most of the particulars are easily verifiable. It comes with shorter supporting statements from David Atayah and Matthew Wilkinson confirming the contents of the first three bags, as well as the details of Alan Parfitt's behaviour prior to his termination from the employment of local government. In an uncharacteristic example of actually dealing with modern technology, my predecessor had the good sense to make a copy of the final text conversation between Alan Parfitt and Mr. Woodward.

I had Martin conduct a follow-up interview with Mr. Woodward last week, but it was unenlightening. Apparently there have been no further bags at number 93 and in the intervening years he has largely discounted many of the stranger aspects of his experience. I wasn't expecting much, as time generally makes people inclined to forget what they would rather not believe, but at least it got Martin out of the Institute for an afternoon, which is always a welcome relief.

Sasha had more luck following up with the old police reports. Alan Parfitt was reported as a missing person by his brother Michael on the 20th of August 2009, and his location remains unknown. The bag of teeth is also corroborated by the police reports of Police Constables Suresh and Altman, though they can provide no further details, as they never made an arrest or even located any suspects.

The medical report on the teeth themselves does give one puzzling detail: the teeth were confirmed to be human, but more than that, as far as the examiner was able to determine… they were all in different stages of decay and didn't match any available dental records, but all two thousand seven hundred and eighty of them were the exact same tooth.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG006 – Squirm

Statement #0140912

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Timothy Hodge, regarding his sexual encounter with one Harriet Lee and her subsequent death. Original statement given December 9th, 2014. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I don't know what happened. I mean, I'm sure she's dead, but I don't…

Let me start from the beginning. I work as a designer. Mainly freelance, with a few more regular gigs with companies who like my work. I also have, well, *had* the luxury of a flat I'd managed to get set up so I could do most of my work there. This meant when I had a big job I spent quite a lot of time not leaving my home. Not the most stable of employment but I got quite good at balancing it so that after a big project I left myself a few days, or maybe even a week, before I had to get started on the next one. I find it's

important that I use this time to unwind and blow off a bit of steam, as when I've got work I often end up missing out on the regular weekend. Drinking and clubbing are my relaxation methods of choice, usually down Camden or Old Street, and while I'll admit I'm not above the occasional party drug I swear that I was stone cold sober when this all took place.

That night in particular, it was about three weeks ago now, I'd just finished a big job for one of my more demanding clients and I wanted to get a bit wrecked. Unfortunately none of my friends were free to join me – not surprising as it was a Thursday in the middle of November – so it didn't feel worth heading all the way into the city. Luckily I live in Brixton, which means I have a few decent options almost on my doorstep, and I happened to know that the Dogstar ran a pretty decent club night on Thursdays. I decided to go along and enjoy myself.

I did enjoy myself in the end. Despite the crowds and the music, I wasn't feeling quite as wild as I expected but I drank a bit and danced plenty. Ok, maybe I wasn't quite as sober as I said earlier but I certainly wouldn't have called myself drunk. Now, I wasn't particularly looking to get laid that night, but I know I'm not an unattractive guy and I live local, so I'm always alert, shall we say, for any possibility of finding myself a partner. It was closing in on midnight when I saw her. She was skinny and had that student look which could have put her age anywhere between nineteen and twenty-eight. Her hair was long, dyed a deep henna red, and she wore torn tights and too much eyeliner. Exactly the sort of girl I go

for.

She was lurking on the dance floor and I wasted no time trying to catch her eye. It was harder than I'd guessed, though, as her attention seemed to be mainly focused on the doors. At first I thought she was waiting for someone but, the more I watched her the more I saw the nervousness in her eyes, maybe even fear? It was at that point she noticed me, and our eyes just locked, you know? She came over and we began to dance together. She was excellent, far better than me, and moved in a smooth, rolling sort of rhythm that made the word "writhe" leap suddenly to my mind.

I offered her a drink but she refused, gesturing instead for water, which I happily got. I couldn't really hear her over the music but you don't go to these nights for conversation. Besides, I heard her loud and clear when she leaned over and asked me if I wanted her. I said yes. Looking back it was stupid, of course it was, but she was beautiful and there was something in the way she moved that really got me. She smiled when I said yes, and for a moment it looked less like a smile of anticipation and more like a smile of relief.

Outside the Dogstar it was much quieter and we had a chance to talk. She told me her name was Harriet and she was very pleased to hear I lived locally, as it was a cold night. She held my arm tightly as we walked back towards my street. At first I thought this was for warmth as she didn't have a coat and I doubted the light jacket she was wearing had much insulation. When I looked at her, though, I saw she was looking around the same way she'd been watching the door earlier. Her nervousness was even more obvious now and she

was peering intently down every street we passed. I asked her if anything was wrong, and tried to tell her that I lived in a nice neighbourhood, she was perfectly safe, that sort of thing. She nodded and agreed but still seemed jumpy.

When we were about half way, she started scratching her arms. At first I thought she was just rubbing them for warmth, but after a few seconds it became clear that she was scratching them quite hard, leaving obvious red marks where her fingernails dug in. I was starting to suspect something was wrong, and asked Harriet if there was anything the matter, anything I should know. She just insisted we head back to my place as quickly as possible. I agreed since I figured that whatever the problem was, we could deal with it easier in my flat than on the cold streets at midnight.

By the time we reached my building, she was staring over her shoulder in near panic. I followed her gaze but couldn't see anything, so quickly opened the front door and let her in. She seemed to relax a bit once we were both in the relatively warm corridor with the door shut firmly behind us. My flat was on the third floor and even though, as I said, I don't live in a bad area, I did have an extra deadlock on my door. Harriet visibly relaxed when she saw it, and more so when it was closed. The skittish glances and scratching her arms stopped almost immediately.

I offered her a coffee or tea to warm up. She just asked for a glass of water, said she was feeling a bit unwell. We sat down and, once I'd fetched her water and fixed myself a coffee, we talked for a while. My instincts had been right – she was a student, studying art. She

hadn't been in London long, she said, was originally from Salisbury and had been finding it… difficult recently. When she left that pause, I saw in her eyes hints of that panic I'd seen on the street.

I asked her to tell me what was wrong, said something was clearly bothering her and I'd like to help. She got very quiet for a few moments and then nodded. She told me she'd been mugged the night before last, although the way she said the word "mugged" made it sound like she wasn't sure. I just nodded and let her continue talking. She lived up in Archway, on a street named Elthorne Road, and had been walking home around midnight when she saw a woman lying face down on the pavement. This woman wore a long red dress and Harriet said she could see it shifting in the orange glow of the streetlamps, as though something was moving underneath it.

Harriet was close to her house, which she shared with several other students, so she said she was maybe less careful than she should have been and had approached, calling out and asking if the woman needed help. There was no response but all movement stopped and the red dress went very still.

Suddenly, far quicker than Harriet could have expected, the woman leapt to her feet and sprinted directly towards her, seizing her by the shoulders and pushing her back against a nearby wall. It happened so fast that Harriet said she had never really gotten a good look at the woman beyond her dress, a head of long, matted black hair and wide, staring eyes. The woman growled something at her, but Harriet couldn't make it out. She tried to ask what the

mugger wanted, but as she did she felt a sudden pain in her stomach, as though she'd been stabbed, which is exactly what she thought had happened. She told me that she had fallen to the ground and lost consciousness almost immediately.

When she awoke, the woman in the red dress was gone. Harriet had expected to find herself lying in a pool of blood from her stomach wound, but could instead find no trace of any injury anywhere, except for some scraped knees where she had fallen to the floor. She had staggered home and tried to sleep it off.

Since then, she said she'd been seeing that woman everywhere she went. She felt like she was being followed all the time and couldn't stay in her own home, as whenever she did it was like this weight was dragging her down. Her skin became so itchy as to be nearly unbearable. Harriet had apparently tried to go to the police, but said as she approached the station she was overcome with such a powerful nausea that she threw up on the pavement. She had tried the hospital, but they just told her there was nothing obvious and to make an appointment with her doctor. She had been spending the last three days just wandering in cafés and bars and clubs, anywhere there were enough people that she felt safe. She just didn't know what to do.

By now point Harriet was crying and I felt like a complete asshole for having brought the issue up. I mumbled some apologies. I don't know what I said; I was just trying to make her feel better. Not sure what I expected to happen but I certainly didn't expect her to kiss me at that moment. I know, I know, she was vulnerable and I feel

like an a… But I swear I wasn't trying to take advantage. I asked her again and again if she was sure, but she just kept nodding and dragged me to the bedroom. I mean, we had sex. There's not much more to say about that, really. The important thing is what happened afterwards.

As we were lying there in bed, exhausted, I rested my head against her shoulder. I was about to say something or other, but before I could, I felt something move. It's hard to describe exactly but it wasn't her shoulder that moved, it was something inside it, under the skin. It squirmed ever so slightly against my cheek.

I shot up in bed, but the only indication that she'd noticed anything amiss was that she reached over and absentmindedly scratched where I'd been lying. I started to relax, lie down again; maybe I'd just imagined it. But at that moment she doubled over and groaned in sudden pain. Her eyes went wide and she clutched her stomach tightly. I tried to see what was wrong, asked if I could help, but she just pushed me away.

I had no idea what to do, so I ran out and towards the bathroom. My mind was going completely blank and I couldn't remember whether I had any painkillers or indigestion medicine. Or should I be calling an ambulance? I wasn't sure, and I ended up rooting through my medicine cabinet, looking for… I don't know; anything that might have helped. I could still hear Harriet moaning in agony from the bedroom, and had just made up my mind to call for an ambulance, when I heard something that stopped me dead in my tracks.

It's hard to really describe the sound that came from the bedroom. The closest I could come would be to say it sounded like… an egg being dropped onto a stone floor; a sort of wet, cracking thump. Then silence. Harriet was no longer making any noise at all. I slowly, very slowly, walked back towards the bedroom. The door was open, but I hadn't turned the light on, so there was little to be seen inside except darkness. I could have turned on the light in the hall, I suppose, but something inside made me think that I didn't want a good look inside that room. I stopped at the threshold. The only illumination at all came from a thin sliver of light coming in through the gap in the curtains from a streetlamp outside.

You'll have to excuse me. What I saw is difficult to put down on paper, but it's the only way to explain why I had to do it. Why setting my flat alight and standing naked in the winter streets until the fire brigade arrived was far better than spending another second in that place. And yes, I admit here I set the fire myself. Show it to the police for all I care, I just need someone to understand.

The room was unrecognisable when I returned. There was a shape on the bed, where Harriet had laid, but it wasn't her anymore. I could barely make out anything even remotely human in the pile of pitted and warped flesh that now remained. The bed itself was slick and shiny with a dark fluid that dripped off the hanging sheets and onto the floor. But what truly repulsed me, what made me flee as I did, was what moved and squirmed on all of it. They covered every surface: the floor, the bed, what used to be Harriet, even the ceiling. A thick, moving carpet of pale, writhing worms.

The flat burned for a very long time.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

This story is concerning. Not because of Mr. Hodge's experience, although I'm sure it was very upsetting. If it was true, of course. In fact, the police report that Sasha was able to acquire throws doubt on much of his story. While Mr. Hodges' flat did indeed catch fire on November 20th of last year, there was apparently no evidence of arson, and no human remains found inside, despite the fact that the fire was brought under control long before any significant damage was done to the structure of the building. They did find some charred organic matter in the bedroom, but it was tested and apparently wasn't human, though the report doesn't list whether its source was ever determined.

I will say it does link up with the reported disappearance one Harriet Lee, a student at Roehampton who was reported missing shortly after this statement was originally given. She seems to match the description given here. Still, that's not really what concerns me either, though obviously it's a tragic loss of life, etcetera, etcetera.

No, what I find quite alarming is that if Mr. Hodge's recollection of Harriet's tale is correct and she was attacked by a woman in a red dress in Archway, then that matches the description and last known location of Jane Prentiss. I can't find any evidence that my

predecessor took follow-up action on this statement, so I've taken the step of reporting Mr. Hodge's to the ECDC. We were unable to locate him to request a follow-up interview, and if he has had intercourse with one of Prentiss' victims, then they'll need to deal with him sooner rather than later. I just hope it's not too late already.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG007 – The Piper

Statement #9220611

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Staff Sergeant Clarence Berry, regarding his time serving with Wilfred Owen in the Great War. Original statement given November 6th, 1922. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

A lot of people call me lucky, you know. Not many came through the entirety of the war in one piece. And if you discount the burns, then I did indeed do just that. Even fewer spent all four years at the front, like I did. I was never sent for treatment for shell shock or injury, and even my encounter with a German flamethrower only ended up with me in a front line hospital at Wipers. I was still in that field hospital when the fighting started at the Somme, so I suppose that was lucky, too.

Four years… I sometimes feel like I'm the only one who saw the whole damn show from start to finish, as though I alone know the

Great War in all its awful glory. But deep down I know that honour, such as it is, has to go to Wilfred. You wouldn't have thought it from his poems, but all told, his time at the front totalled not much over a year. Yet he got to know the war in a way I never did. He's certainly the only person I know that ever saw The Piper.

I grew up poor on the streets of Salford, so I joined the army as soon as I was old enough. I know you've heard the stories of brave lads signing up at 14, but this was before the war started, so there wasn't such a demand for manpower and the recruiters were much more scrupulous about making sure those enlisting were of age. Even so, I was almost too skinny for them to take me and barely made the required weight. But in the end I made it through and, after my training, was assigned to the Manchester Regiment, 2nd Battalion, and it wasn't long before we were shipped off to France with the British Expeditionary Force. You seem like educated sorts, so I'm sure you read in the papers how that went. Soon enough, though, the trenches were dug and the boredom started to set in. Now, boredom is fine, understand, when the alternatives are bombs, snipers and gas attacks, but months at a time sitting in a waterlogged hole in the ground, hoping your foot doesn't start swelling, well… it has a quiet terror all its own.

Wilfred came to us in July of 1916. I'm not intimately familiar with his history but he clearly came from stock good enough to be assigned as a probationary Second Lieutenant. I was a Sergeant at the time, so had the job of giving him the sort of advice and support that a new officer needs from a NCO with two years of mud under

his nails. That notwithstanding, I will admit taking a dislike to the man when I first met him – he outranked me, and most of the others in the trench, in both military and social terms, and he seemed to treat the whole affair with an airy contempt. There's a sort of numbness that you adopt after months or years of bombing, a deliberate blankness which I think offended him. He was unfailingly polite, far more so than I was accustomed to in the Flanders mud, where the conversations, such as they were, were coarse and bleak. Yet under this politeness I could feel him dismiss out of hand any suggestion that I gave him or report that I made. It came as no surprise to me when he mentioned he wrote poetry. To be perfectly honest I expected him to be dead within a week.

To Wilfred's credit, he made it almost a year before anything horrendous happened to him, and by the following spring I'd venture to say that we might almost have been able to call each other friends. He had been composing poetry during this time, of course, and occasionally would read it out to some of the men. They generally enjoyed it, but personally I thought it was dreadful – there was an emptiness to it and every time he tried to put the war into words it just sounded trite, like there was no soul to what he had to say. He would often talk about his literary aspirations, and how he longed to be remembered, to take what this war truly was and immortalise it.

Were I prone to flights of fancy, I daresay I would call his words portentous. When he talked like that, he had an odd habit of trailing off in the middle of the conversation with a tilt of his head,

as though his attention had been taken by a far-off sound.

The spring thaw had just recently passed when it happened, and we were on the offensive. Our battalion was near Savy Wood when the orders came down – we were to attack the Hindenburg Line. Our target was a trench on the west side of St. Quentin. It was a quiet march. Even at this stage there was often still some excitement when the orders came down for action, even if it was usually stifled by that choking fear that you got when waiting for the whistle. Yet that morning there was something different in the air, an oppressive dread. We'd made this attack before, and knew that the change from the valley exposed us to artillery fire. And artillery was always the scariest part of it for me. Bayonets you could dodge, bullets you could duck, even gas you could block out if you were lucky, but artillery? All you could do against artillery was pray.

Even Wilfred felt it, I could tell. He was usually quite talkative before combat. Morbid, but always talkative. That morning he didn't say a word. I tried to talk with him and raise his spirits, as is a sergeant's duty, but he just held up his hand to quiet me, and turned his head to listen. At the time I didn't know what it was he was hearing but it kept him silent. Even when we crested the ridge, and the rest of us tried to drown out the deafening thrum of artillery with our own charging cry, even then he made no sound.

The ground shook with the impact of the mortar shells, and I ran from foxhole to crater to foxhole, keeping my head low to avoid the bullets. As I ran, I felt a shooting pain in my ankle and pitched forward into the mud. Looking down, I saw I'd been caught by a

length of barbed wire, half-hidden by the damp upturned soil. I felt a surge of panic begin to overtake me, and frantically tried to remove the wire from my leg, but only succeeded in getting my hand scratched up quite badly.

I looked around desperately to see if there was anyone else nearby who could help. And there, not twenty yards in front of me, I saw Wilfred standing, his face blank and his head swaying to some unheard rhythm. And then I did hear it – gently riding over the pulse of mortars and the rattle of guns and the moans of dying men, a faint, piping melody. I could not have told you whether it was bagpipes or panpipes or some instrument I had never heard before, but its whistling tune was unmistakable, and struck me with a deepest sadness and a gentle creeping fear.

And in that moment I knew what was about to happen. I looked at Wilfred, and as our eyes met I saw that he knew as well. I heard a single gunshot, much louder than any of the others somehow, and I saw him go stiff, his eyes wide. And then the mortar blast hit him, and he was lost in an eruption of mud and earth.

I had plenty of time to mourn him, lying in that dreadful hole until nightfall, when I could free my leg as quietly and gently as possible before crawling back to our trench. It was slow going; every time a flare went up I could only lay motionless and pray, but the good Lord saw fit to let me reach our line relatively unscathed. I was quickly bundled off to the field hospital, which was overburdened as always. They didn't have much in the way of medicine or staff to spare, and certainly no beds free, so they washed my wounds with

iodine, bandaged them, and sent me on my way. Told me to come back if I got gangrene.

I did have a look around the place to see if I could find Wilfred, but there was no sign of him to be found anywhere. Asking around the trench, no-one had seen him return among the wounded, so I began to reconcile myself to the fact that he was dead. He wasn't the first friend I'd lost to the Germans nor even the first I'd seen die in front of me, but something about that strange music that I heard in the moments before that explosion lingered in my mind and left me dwelling on Wilfred in many a quiet moment.

It was probably about a week and a half later I heard shouting from the end of the trench. It was a scouting party who had been reconnoitring the river that flowed near Savy Wood. Apparently, they had found a wounded officer lying in a shell hole there and brought him back. I made my way over, and was astounded to see that it was Wilfred. His uniform was torn and burned, he was covered with blood and his eyes had a distant, far off expression to them, but he was most definitely alive. I rode with him back up to the field hospital, along with the Corporal of the squad who had found him.

Apparently he had been lying in that hole for days, ever since the battle. They'd found him there, half-dead from dehydration and fatigue, covered in the gore of another soldier. Whatever shell had created the hole he'd ended up in had clearly annihilated some other poor soul, and it was in his gory remnants that Wilfred had lain for almost two weeks.

I waited outside the hospital tent while he was being treated. The doctor came out shortly, a grave look on his face. He told me the Lieutenant was physically unharmed – something I considered at the time nothing short of a miracle – but that he had one of the worst cases of shell shock the doctor had ever encountered, and would have to be shipped back to England for recuperation. I asked him if I could see him, and the doctor consented, though he warned me that Wilfred hadn't said a word since he'd been brought in.

As soon as I stepped inside the medical tent I was overwhelmed by the sweet scent of decaying flesh and the moans of pain and despair. The sharp smell of the disinfectant brought back unpleasant memories of chlorine gas attacks. Still, I eventually found my way over to Wilfred's bed and, sure enough, there he was, staring silently out at the world, though with an intensity that alarmed me. I followed his gaze to a bed nearby, and there I saw a private I didn't recognise. His forehead was slick with sweat and his chest rose and fell quickly, then abruptly stopped. I realised with a start that a man had just died, and nobody had noticed except Wilfred.

I tried to engage him in conversation, rattled off a few meaningless pleasantries. "How are you doing, old man?" "Heard you had a bit of a close call." "Glad you found yourself a crump-hole." All that sort of nonsense. None of it seemed to produce any reaction in him, and instead he turned to me and after a long while he simply said: "I met the war."

I told him that he certainly had, not many walk away from

something like that and lying in that hole for so long, surrounded by all the death… Well, he had definitely met the war and it was rotten bloody business. But Wilfred just shook his head like I didn't understand, and to be honest I was starting to feel like I didn't, and he told me again that he "met the war". He said it was no taller than I was.

It struck me that perhaps he was describing some dreadful mirage that had come upon him as he lay in that wretched place, and I asked him to tell me what the war looked like.

I remember exactly what he said. He told me it had three faces. One to play its pipes of scrimshawed bone, one to scream its dying battle cry and one that would not open its mouth, for when it did blood and sodden soil flowed out like a waterfall. Those arms that did not play the pipes were gripping blades and guns and spears, while others raised their hands in futile supplication of mercy, and one in a crisp salute. It wore a tattered coat of wool, olive green where it was not stained black, and beneath, nothing could be seen but a body beaten, slashed and shot and until nothing remained but the wounds themselves.

I had heard quite enough by this point, and said so to Wilfred, but if he heard me he gave no indication of it. He told me that the war, "the Piper", had come to claim him, and he had begged to remain. The thing had paused its tune for but a moment, and with one of its arms it reached out and handed him a pen. He said he knew it would return for him someday, but now he too would live to play its tune. The way he looked at me at that moment was the same

way he'd looked at me before the shell hit, and for a moment I could have sworn I once again heard that music on the breeze.

I left almost immediately after that, and was later told that he'd been shipped back to Britain, to recuperate at Craiglockhart. The other men grumbled about officers' perks and a nice holiday for the Lieutenant, but they didn't know what he'd been through, and I found it very hard to envy him myself. At one point I asked some of the squad who brought him back whether he'd been holding a pen when they found him, but they told me he hadn't. The only thing they'd found nearby were the tags of the dead man among his remains. A man named Joseph Rayner.

And for a long while that was that. Wilfred was back at home recovering and taking on lighter duties, while I slogged on through the mud of Flanders. I had a few close calls myself – including the flamethrower that marked me so distinctively. Could have been worse, of course; if the rain hadn't almost liquefied the mud of no man's land I'd have gone up like a lucifer.

I did start to notice something among the troops, though. Every time we lined up to go over the top I would watch them, look into their faces. Most of them showed naught but the starkest fear, of course, but a few of them seemed distant. The whistle would startle them back to themselves and with wide eyes they would surge forward.

I had seen this before all that business with Wilfred, but had always assumed it was simply the mind trying to choke down the

likelihood of its own death. Now when I watched, I found I could not help but notice the slight tilt of the head, as though gently straining their ears to hear a far-off tune. Those men never made it back to the trenches.

You know the phrase “to pay the piper”. I thought on it a lot through those many months – the debt of Hamelin, who for their greed had their children taken from them, never to be returned. Did you know Hamelin is a real place in Germany? Yes, not too far from Hanover as I recall. We had a prisoner once from there – I wanted to ask him about the old fairy tale and what, if anything, he knew of The Piper. The poor soul didn’t speak a word of English, though, and died from an infected shrapnel wound a few days later. He spent his last minutes humming a familiar tune. That night, as we scrambled through mud and broken metal in another futile attack, I began to wonder: were we the children stolen from their parents by The Piper’s tune? Or were we the rats that were led to the river and drowned because they ate too much of the wealthy’s grain?

Still, those are musings for poets, among whom I do not number. I did keep up with Wilfred’s work, though, and was startled to see how much it had changed since he left. Where once it could have been dismissed as frivolous, there was now a tragedy to it that flowed from the words. Even now, I can’t hear *Exposure* without being back in that damned trench at wintertime. And the public clearly felt similar, as one of the few newspapers we actually got through to the line had an extensive article praising his first collection. Despite all this, there was something about it that sat

uneasily with me.

Wilfred returned to the 2nd Manchesters in July of 1918. He was clearly much changed from his time away, and seemed to be in good enough spirits, though we talked little any more, and when he looked at me, I saw in his eyes a fear that he was quick to hide. The war was grinding towards a close at this point. There was a fatigue that could be felt everywhere; even the enemy machine guns felt slower and more begrudging in their fire, but this charged our commanders to spur us on to more and more aggressive actions. Some desperate attempt to push Germany into a surrender, I suppose, and our attacks grew to a crescendo.

On the first day of October, we were ordered to storm the enemy position at Joncourt. I remember that the weather that day was beautiful – a last day of sunshine before autumn pressed in. We charged with some success, as I believe the German artillery hadn't been lined up correctly, and for the first time since his return I found myself fighting alongside Wilfred. I can say without a word of a lie that across all the war I never saw a soldier fight with such ferocity as I saw in him that day. I hasten to add that that statement is not given in admiration – the savagery I saw in him as he tore into a man with his bayonet… I'd just as soon forget it. As he charged, he howled a terrible battle cry and, just for a moment, I could have sworn that I saw him cast a shadow that was not his own. I read in the paper he won the Military Cross for that attack.

It was a month later that I woke up to find him sitting next to my bed. He stared at me, not unkindly, though there was something in

his eye that put my ill at ease. “Almost over now, Clarence,” he said to me. I said yes, it did seem to be all coming to an end. He smiled and shook his head. He sat there quietly for some time, at one point a flare burst in the sky outside, and enough of that stark red light came through the dugout’s makeshift doorway for me to see that Wilfred was crying. I knew he was listening to The Piper’s tune. He asked me if I heard it, and I told him no, I didn’t, and I wasn’t sure I ever really had. He nodded, and said he didn’t know which of us was the lucky one, and neither did I. Still don’t, really.

Wilfred Owen died crossing the canal at Sambre-Oise two days later. There wasn’t meant to be much, if any, resistance, but some of the soldiers stationed there returned fire. I found myself crouching behind him as the Captain, who had been shot in the hip, was pulled to safety.

As we prepared to charge, Wilfred stopped all at once and turned to me with a smile on his face. At that moment I saw a trickle of blood start to flow from an opening hole in his forehead. I feel like I should make this clear – I have seen many people get shot. I know what it looks like and how a bullet hole appears. But here, the bullet hole simply opened, like an eye, and he fell to the ground, dead.

It was told to me later that it was on that day the first overtures of peace were made between the nations, and the Armistice was signed almost exactly a week later. We were shipped home soon after.

I believe it was not merely on that day, but at that very moment, when Wilfred fell, that the peace was finally assured. No-one can convince me otherwise. Did The Piper spare him before? Did it simply use him, later to cast him aside? I don't know, and I try not to think about it overmuch. I have a wife now, and a child on the way, but I still get nightmares sometimes. The parade for Armistice Day passed by my house last year, and I had to shut my window tight when the military band marched past. It wasn't a tune I cared to hear.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Well, if further evidence was needed of my predecessor's disorganisation, here we have it. A statement from 1922 filed among the mid-2000s. Obviously there's not much research or further investigation to be done into a case almost a hundred years old, especially when it involves so well-documented a figure as Wilfred Owen.

Still, an interesting enough tale, and I feel like I recognise the name 'Joseph Rayner' from somewhere, though for the life of me I couldn't say where. I've had the case returned to its proper location in the archives.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG008 – Burned Out

Statement #0071304

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Ivo Lensik, regarding his experiences during construction of a house on Hill Top Road, Oxford. Original statement given March 13th, 2007. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I've worked in construction for almost twenty years now, mostly in and around the Oxford area. When my father passed away in 1996, I took over his contracting business and have been working steadily ever since.

I can do most anything I'm called on for but generally specialise in new builds, plumbing and wiring work specifically, and I've got something of a reputation for being available at short notice, so it's not unusual for me to be called in part-way through a build to do some work. When I got the job working on a house down Hill Top Road in mid-November, nothing about the situation seemed strange

to me. The guy they had doing the wiring had been called for jury duty and they'd lost him for a couple of weeks, so they asked me to step in. I was on another job during the day, but my fiancée Sam was at a conference in Hamburg for a while and we were saving up for the wedding, so I figured I could do it in the evenings.

Now, Hill Top Road is quite a secluded street around the Cowley area. There aren't many student houses on it, so it's actually quite a peaceful place, especially after all the kids living there have gone to bed. The house itself had only recently been started, as some dispute over ownership had kept the land locked for years, and when I turned up it was still mostly empty. It had two floors with a loft that was going to be another bedroom, to match the rest of the road. The doors had been fitted, although the locks had not, but the empty spaces where the windows were due to be still stood vacant, letting in the chill. That side of the road backed onto South Park with fences marking the bottom of each garden.

The garden of this particular house was mostly full of building materials and debris, but I remember that standing over it all was a tree. It was very large and very dead and not to put too fine a point on it, the thing creeped me right the hell out. It seemed to cast odd shadows, which were dark and clear on even the most overcast of days.

But it wasn't the tree that started it, though. No, that happened my third night on the job. It must have been 8 or 9 in the evening, as it had been dark for a couple of hours. I was working on the ground floor wiring when I heard a knock at the front door. At first I

thought it must have been one of the other builders who had forgotten something, but then I realised that there was no lock on the door; any of the others would have known that and just come right in. I began to feel slightly uneasy, when the knock came again. Over the years I've had a few altercations with punks that wanted to cause trouble on my sites, so I picked up a hammer as I approached. I did my best to hold it casually, as though I'd just been using it.

I opened the door to see an unassuming man in a tan coat. He was quite young, white, maybe mid-twenties, clean-shaven with shaggy, chestnut brown hair. His coat was quite an old cut; it seemed to me he looked like something out of an old Polaroid.

He said his name was Raymond Fielding and that he owned the house. As he spoke, I felt my grip on the hammer tightening although I have no idea why. I asked him if he had any ID or documents and he handed over to me what seemed, as far as I could tell, to be the deed to the house, as well as the land beneath, and did indeed list a man named Raymond Fielding as the owner. So I let him in.

I apologised for the draught and said the window panes were being put in over the next few days but until then it was going to be cold. He didn't respond, just walked over to the empty frame of the back window and stared out into the garden. I tried to get on with my work, keeping one eye on this stranger. Nothing about the situation felt quite right, but he didn't seem to be doing anything suspicious, just standings there, looking into the garden. So I returned my

concentration to the wiring.

After a minute or two, I became conscious of a sharp, unpleasant smell. I thought maybe I had wired something up wrong, but no, it smelled like burning human hair. I looked over to where Raymond had been standing, but he was gone. Where he had been there was just a patch of scorched wooden floor, still apparently smouldering and giving off that dreadful stink.

I ran to get the fire extinguisher from an adjoining room. I was gone only a few seconds but when I returned the smell was gone and there was no longer any smoke or fire, just the burn mark on the wooden floor in front of that window. Touching it, I found that it was just as cold as the rest of the floor. I started to clean, and found that the wood below appeared to be undamaged, with just a coating of soot and ashes on top.

I had a look around for this Raymond Fielding, but if he was ever truly there, then he was gone now. It was only when I had finished cleaning up the mark that the true strangeness of the situation began to sink in and I started to panic.

I should probably explain my fear a bit, as it wasn't because of ghosts, or phantom smells or anything like that. You see, there is quite a significant history of schizophrenia among the men in my family. My father had it, as did my great uncle, and in both of their cases it led to suicide. I didn't know much about my great uncle, but I had seen my father's decline first hand. It had started shortly after his divorce from my mother, although thinking about it, it was

perhaps the early stages that had exacerbated the problems in their marriage.

Regardless, he began to spend a lot of time locked in his study doing “his work”. I was maybe 24 or 25 at the time, and still living at home. I was working with my dad, doing much the same job as I do now, and it was at this point I had to take on more and more of the actual running of the business, since my father was beginning to prioritise his “work” over his actual job.

His “work” turned out to be fractals. He became obsessed with them, seemed to spend all of his time drawing them, staring at them, measuring the patterns they created. He would talk to me for hours about the maths behind them and tell me that he was on the verge of a great truth. He was going to shake mathematics to its foundations once he figured out this truth, hidden in those cascading fractal patterns.

One day I returned home to find my father staring through the blinds in terror. He claimed that someone was following him, told me that they were planning to stop his work. I asked him who it was, but he shook his head violently and said I’d know him when I saw him because “all the bones are in his hands”.

I tried to get him help, of course I did, but he refused to take any medication, as he said it interfered with his work, and he wasn’t dangerous, so I couldn’t have him committed. I knew it was only a matter of time before he hurt himself, and sure enough, the day came when he wouldn’t answer the knocks on his study door. I

broke in to find him lying dead in a pool of blood, with deep gouges along his wrists and arms. The walls were covered in fractal drawings, every surface was piled high with them and pencil shavings littered the floor. The inquest ruled his death a suicide, although the coroner wasn't able to identify the tool that had made the cuts on his arms, or why he had such a look of fear on his face.

This is why the apparent disappearance of Raymond Fielding worried me so much. I was younger than my father had been, but still had that possibility within me. This train of thought was likely why I wasn't paying as much attention as I should have been where I was stepping, and I slipped on the wet section of flooring that I had just cleaned. I fell forward, hitting my head badly.

I don't think I was unconscious for more than a few seconds, but when I woke up I was bleeding from a deep cut on my temple. I tried to make it to my car, but I was so dizzy just standing up that it was clear driving was out of the question. So I called for an ambulance. It arrived quickly and it took me to the John Radcliffe Hospital.

When I got there, they were very responsive and quickly determined that I had quite a severe concussion, so I was kept overnight for observation. I told my doctor everything about my encounter with Raymond Fielding. If it was early signs of any developing schizophrenia, I wanted to know as soon as possible. The doctor listened closely and said it was unlikely, as it would be surprising if I developed full hallucinations so abruptly, but that they were keeping me under observation.

I noticed, as I was explaining my experience, the nurse taking my blood pressure seemed to be listening intently, though she left before I could ask her why.

I stayed in that hospital for another two days. Sam wanted to cut short her trip when she heard about my concussion, but I told her that any real danger had passed and I should be fine until the end of her conference, so I was mostly on my own for that time.

It was the morning before she was due to return that I saw the nurse again. I'd just had the news that the tests had all come back fine, so I was being discharged and she came in to give me a final check.

She asked me if I was sure the man who had come to the house on Hill Top Road had called himself Raymond Fielding. I told her yes, and that I'd even seen his signature on the deed to the land, but that I didn't know any of the history of the place. She got very quiet and sat down.

This nurse was an older woman, Malaysian, I think, and I would have guessed in her fifties, though I didn't ask. She said her family had lived on Hill Top Road for a long time now and she knew the place I was working. In the 1960s, the house that had stood there had belonged to a man named Raymond Fielding.

He was a devout churchgoer, and had used it as a halfway house on behalf of the local diocese, looking after teenage runaways and young people with mental problems. The neighbourhood apparently

hadn't liked it, as its residents often got into trouble and Hill Top Road had started to get something of a reputation for it. Nobody ever said a word against Raymond himself, though, who was by all accounts such a kind and gentle soul as to be almost universally beloved.

Nobody was sure exactly when Agnes moved in; some even said she was Raymond's actual daughter, as the two of them looked something alike and she was younger than most of the other kids living there. She couldn't have been more than eleven when she turned up, and didn't really talk, other than to tell people her name if asked. Everyone just started to notice this child with mousey brown pigtails staring at them through the windows of Raymond's house. As far as anyone could tell, that's all she ever seemed to do – stare at people from the windows. It was unsettling, but no-one had any real problem with it.

Over the next few years, the kids at the halfway house stopped causing problems in the area around Hill Top Road. It wasn't an obvious change, but gradually the people living there were seen less and less. Raymond was still there and still seemed perfectly cheery. If anyone asked him about a resident who hadn't been around for a while, he'd explain that they'd moved on or found a place of their own, and no-one really cared enough to follow up on his information.

Soon, the only people living in that old house were Agnes and Raymond. Then Raymond disappeared as well. Agnes must have been 18 or 19 by this point, and still hardly ever talked. When she

was questioned about what happened to Raymond, she simply said he had gone away and that the house was hers. People got a bit worried at that, and the police conducted a small investigation, but the house had been legally signed over to Agnes, and there was no sign of any foul play. No sign of Raymond either, for that matter.

And so the years passed and Agnes lived on in that old house. Hardly ever seemed to leave it, just watched from the windows. Folks in Hill Top Road learned it was best not to keep pets, as they tended to vanish. Then, in 1974, Henry White goes missing. Five years old, and the search turned up nothing.

People had always whispered about Agnes, but now the whispers got nasty. Nasty enough that when smoke was seen pouring out of the old Fielding house a week after little Henry disappeared, no-one did a thing. No-one phoned the fire brigade or tried to help. They just watched. Agnes must not have phoned for assistance either, as by the time the fire trucks arrived, there was nothing left to save.

Through it all, nobody saw any sign of life from within the building. No screaming, no movement, nothing but the roaring of the flames. When the fire was finally put out, they did find human remains, but it wasn't Agnes, nor was it Henry White. The only body they found was that of Raymond Fielding. All that was left was a badly-charred skeleton, missing its right hand.

That was the history of the place, as the nurse told it to me. Once the rubble had been cleared away, the land had become tied up in legal complications relating to the ownership and had remained so

until earlier last year. She asked me not to let anyone else know she'd been talking about it, as she didn't want people to think she had been spreading stories. I told her I'd keep quiet and she left. I didn't see her again and was discharged soon afterwards.

I rested at home for a couple of days, but I find forced inactivity very boring, and my head was feeling fine so I decided to go back to work. By all rights, I should probably have avoided returning to Hill Top Road, but I found myself resenting how the house made me feel. I didn't believe in ghosts, to be honest I'm still not sure I do, and had been assured by the doctor that I wasn't displaying any other symptoms of schizophrenia, so there was no reason for me to feel this gnawing apprehension. I convinced myself that the only way to banish the feeling was to return and finish the job that I started. So that's what I did, although I was careful to work only in daylight now and tried to avoid being alone.

Even so, there were occasional moments when I would find myself the only one working in a room, or when silence fell across the building. And then I would smell it again, that whiff of burnt hair, or catch a glimpse of brown pigtails disappearing around a corner. As the job drew towards a close, it became harder to avoid working there after dark, until I lost track of time completely one afternoon, and looked up to see that not only had night fallen, but I was the only one left in the building.

Almost as soon as I realised this, I began to sweat. At first I thought it was nerves, or even a panic attack at finding myself alone, but it was the heat; this warmth that seemed to start in my bones and

radiate out through me. I took off my hat and jacket, but I just got hotter and hotter until it felt like I was cooking from the inside. I tried to scream but I couldn't find my breath, I couldn't move. I was burning up.

There was a knock at the door, and the feeling abruptly vanished. I was cold again, lying on the bare floor. I struggled to my feet as the knock came again. My hand shook as I opened it. By now I didn't know what to expect. Would it be Raymond again? Agnes? Or some other thing to announce the end of my sanity.

What I did not expect was a Catholic priest. He was short, and a bit portly, with close-cropped hair and deep smile lines around his mouth. He introduced himself as Father Edwin Burroughs and told me that "Annie" had asked him to pay the place a visit. I didn't know any Annie and told him so, and he seemed slightly confused, said she worked as a nurse at the John Radcliffe Hospital.

This allayed my fears enough that I let him in, and I asked him if he was some sort of exorcist. Father Burroughs smiled and told me yes, that's exactly what he was.

So I told him my story as he went around examining the house. He nodded as I went through what happened, occasionally asking a question about what had been said or how I had felt. Finally he seemed satisfied and said he'd do what he could. He explained that exorcism was really only for demons and it wasn't something he could do to ghosts, at least not officially – whether or not ghosts actually existed was apparently just as divisive a question within

the church as outside of it – but he would go through some blessings and see if he could help. He asked me to wait outside while he worked, so I headed into the back garden and waited.

As I stood there in the cold, my eyes fell on the tree. That creepy, damn tree. I don't know why, but at that moment I felt an intense, maddening anger at that tree. I picked up a crowbar that lay on a nearby pile of wood and, drawing my arm back, I swung it at the trunk, burying it with all my might.

I felt something warm and wet spray out where I had hit it. Sap? No, it didn't feel like sap. I turned on my torch to see blood flowing from the wounded tree. It ran down the crowbar and dripped onto the earth, running in rivulets. As it reached the roots I saw something else in my torch's light, curling up from the base of the tree were old, black scorch marks.

At that moment I made my decision. It was easy, like destroying this tree was the only thing to do, the only path to follow. I found a long chain among the building materials in the garden and wrapped it around the still-bleeding trunk, then attached the ends to my car. It took me less than a minute to pull it down, and there was no more blood. When the tree lay on its side, uprooted and powerless, I gazed into the hole where it had sat and noticed something lying there in the dirt.

Climbing down, I retrieved what turned out to be a small wooden box, about six inches square, with an intricate pattern carved along the outside. Engraved lines covered it, warping and weaving

together, making it hard to look away.

I opened the box and sitting inside was a single green apple. It looked fresh, shiny, with a coat of condensation like it had just been picked on a cool spring morning. I picked it up. I wasn't going to eat it, I'm not that stupid, but more than bleeding trees or phantom burning, this confused me.

As I took it out of the box, though, it began to turn. The skin turned brown and bruised and started to shrivel in my hand. Then it split. And out came spiders. Dozens, hundreds of spiders erupting from this apple that was rotting right before my eyes. I shrieked and dropped it before any of them could touch my arm. The apple fell to the ground and burst in a cloud of dust. I backed away and waited until I was sure all the spiders had left before retrieving the box. I smashed it with a crowbar, and threw the remains into a skip.

Father Burroughs returned shortly afterwards. He told me he'd done his prayers and hoped that it would be some help. If he noticed the felled tree, he didn't ask any questions about it, instead he just handed me his business card and told me to give him a call if there were any further problems. The house didn't feel any different, but there was no smell of burned hair, no heat or ghosts or any weirdness I could see. I worked on that house for another week, and I don't know if it was the father's prayers or my uprooting the tree, but I didn't encounter anything else unusual during my time there. After that, my part of the job was finished, and I haven't been back to Hill Top Road since.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Ah, head trauma and latent schizophrenia – the ghost's best friends. Aside from excessive indulgence in psychoactive drugs, it seems to me that there is simply no better way to make contact with the spirit world. Still, glibness aside, the history of 105 Hill Top Road does bear investigation. And while I trust Mr. Lensik's testimony of his own experiences about as far as I can throw a bleeding tree, there is a note in the file mentioning that Father Edwin Burroughs put down his own version of these events in Statement 0218011. While I have yet to locate that particular file in the chaos that passed for Gertrude Robinson's archive, the suggestion that there may be external corroboration does lend some potential credence to Mr. Lensik's wild tale. No other workers on the building site at the time reported any disturbances like the ones reported by Mr. Lensik.

Martin was unable to find the exact date the original house was built but the earliest records he could find list it as being bought by Walter Fielding in 1891. It was inherited by his son Alfred Fielding in 1923, and then by his grandson, Raymond Fielding, in 1957. There was no record of it being used as a halfway house, certainly not one connected to the local Catholic diocese, although the Church of England records for the area that Sasha got access to were unfortunately incomplete. The older residents of Hill Top Road back up the account given by the nurse, Anna Kasuma, as related here.

Tim managed to organise an interview with Mrs. Kasuma, but she apparently could provide no further information beyond what she told to Mr. Lensik. She did admit, though, to asking Father Burroughs to take a look at the house, as she was worried about it, and had seen him perform exorcisms before. There doesn't seem to be any print evidence of what happened to the house; no news stories or similar regarding the fire. But one resident did provide a photograph of the house in flames.

Raymond Fielding's obituary briefly reported his death as having been due to a house fire, and lauds his work with troubled youth, but gives no details about either. Agnes remains something of a mystery, as we have not been able to find any definitive proof that she even existed.

Except… We cannot prove any connection, but Martin unearthed a report on an Agnes Montague, who was found dead in her Sheffield flat on the evening of November 23rd 2006, the same day Mr. Lensik claims to have uprooted the tree. She had hanged herself. Her age is given at 26, which doesn't match up at all.

But tied by a chain to her waist was a severed human hand, a right hand. Its owner was never identified, but the coroner was apparently quite perplexed, as tissue decay would seem to indicate that the hand's original owner must have died at almost the exact same time as Agnes.

Two families have lived in the house since this statement was originally made but no further manifestations have been reported

on Hill Top Road.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG009 – A Father's Love

Statement #0020312

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Julia Montauk, regarding the actions and motivations of her father, the serial killer Robert Montauk. Original statement given December 3rd, 2002. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

My father was a murderer. There's no way I can reasonably deny it at this point; the evidence provided by the police was overwhelming, and I saw his shed myself. I'm not here to try and clear his name. There wouldn't be much point, anyway, as I'm sure you know he died in prison last year. Seven years isn't much to have served out of a life sentence, but I doubt it was the early parole he'd have hoped for.

Sorry, maybe that wasn't in the best taste. Still, his passing is why I feel like I can tell this story; something I've never really felt free to do before now. I always expected him to talk about it during the

media frenzy that surrounded his trial, but for whatever reason, he kept quiet. I think I understand a bit more now why he never spoke about it, preferring people draw their own conclusions, but at the time, I couldn't fathom why he just sat there silently, letting others talk for him.

I'd like to tell someone now, though, and I've only recently finished my court-appointed counselling sessions, so I'd rather not tell the tabloids and have 'MY FATHER KILLED TO FUEL CULT MAGIC, SAYS DAUGHTER OF MONSTER' splashed over page 7 of the weekend edition. So that leaves you guys. Respectable is hardly the word I'd use, but it's better than nothing.

So yes, my father killed at least 40 people over the course of the five years prior to his arrest in 1995. I won't recount the lurid details – if you're interested you can look up Robert Montauk in the newspaper archive of any library. There'll be plenty there: the papers clearly didn't care much about the American bombing, because in April of that year they seemed to be talking about nothing but my father. There are also a couple of books on him, none of which I can really recommend, but I guess Ray Cowan's *No Bodies in the Shed* is the closest to what I'd consider accurate, although it does imply that I was an accomplice, despite the fact that I was twelve years old at the time.

Honestly, I discovered most of the details from the newspapers and the court, just like everyone else. My father spent my formative years killing dozens of people and I had no idea. But the more I think back over my childhood, the more sure I am that there was

something else going on. I don't have any theories as to what any of this means, but I just need to get it down on paper somewhere. And this seems as good a place as any.

I've always lived in the same house on York Road in Dartford. Even now, after all that's happened, and all I know about what went on there, I can't bring myself to leave. As far as I know, the shed came with the house; it always sat in the garden: old, wooden and silent. I don't recall it being used until after the night my mother disappeared. That's when everything started to get strange.

My memory of early childhood is patchy – mostly isolated images and impressions – but I remember the night she vanished like it was yesterday. I was seven years old, and had been to the cinema that evening for the very first time in my life. We had been to see *The Witches* at what was back then the ABC, down on Shaftesbury Avenue. I had seen films before, of course, on our tiny living room television, but to see a movie on the big screen was awe-inspiring. The film itself was terrifying, though, and even now I'd say it's far scarier than any "child's film" has a right to be. I remember I spent a lot of it close to tears, but had been so proud of the fact that I hadn't cried at all. When we got home, I lay awake for a long time. That scene where Luke is transformed into a mouse kept playing in my mind, and for some reason, it left me too afraid to go to sleep.

It was then that I heard a thump from downstairs, like something heavy falling over. I didn't have a clock in my room, so I had no idea what the time was, but I recall looking out of the window and the world was dark and utterly silent. The thump came again, and I

decided to go downstairs and see what it was.

The landing was almost pitch black, and I tried to be as quiet as possible so nobody would know I was there. The fourth stair down from the top of the staircase always creaked, and still does in fact, but I don't think I've ever heard it creak louder than it did that night as I crept down them so slowly. The lights downstairs were all turned off, except for the kitchen light, which I could see from the bottom of the stairway.

I walked into the kitchen to find it empty. The back door stood open, and a cool breeze blew through it that made me shiver in my pyjamas. I saw something shiny laying on the table. Reaching up, I found my mother's pendant. The design had always struck me as beautiful: it was silver, an abstract shape of a hand with a symbol on it that I believe was meant to represent a closed eye. I had never seen her take it off. In my child's mind, I assumed that she had just left it on the table, an accident, and that the open door meant nothing. I went back upstairs, necklace clutched firmly in my hand, to return it to her. She wasn't in bed, of course. The space next to where my father lay fast asleep was empty.

I gently touched my sleeping father's shoulder, and he awoke slowly. I asked him where mum was, and he started to say something when he saw the silver chain clutched in my hands. He quickly got out of bed and started to get dressed. As he pulled on a shirt, he asked me where I had found it, and I told him, on the kitchen table. Following me downstairs, his gaze was immediately locked on the open door, and he paused. Instead of going outside,

he walked over to the kitchen sink and turned on one of the taps. Immediately there began to flow a dark, dirty-looking liquid and the sick, salty smell of brackish water hit my nose, though at the time I didn't understand that's what it was.

The light in the kitchen blew out at that moment and the room got very dark. My father told me everything was fine, that I should go back to bed. His hands shook slightly as he took the pendant from me, and I didn't believe him, but I did what I was told anyway. I don't know how long I lay there, waiting for my father to return that night, but I know it was getting light outside when I finally fell asleep.

Eventually I woke up. The house was quiet and empty. I had missed the start of school by hours, but that was fine, because I didn't want to leave the house. I just sat in the living room, silent and still.

It was almost evening again by the time my father actually returned. His face was pale and he barely looked at me, just walked straight to the cupboard and poured himself a glass of scotch. He sat next to me, drained the glass, and told me that my mother was gone. I didn't understand. Still don't, really. But he said it with such finality that I started to cry, and I didn't stop for a very long time.

My father was a policeman, as I'm sure you've read, so as a child I just assumed that the police had looked for my mother and failed to find her. It wasn't until much later that I discovered they'd never even had a missing persons report filed on her. As far as I know, I never had any living grandparents, and apparently no-one noticed

she was gone – which was strange, as I have vague memories of her having friends over a lot before she vanished. Everyone assumes she was one of my father's first victims, but there was never enough evidence to add it to the official tally. It doesn't really matter.

For what it's worth, I don't think he did it. I won't deny it makes sense from the outside, but I remember how devastated he was when she disappeared. He started drinking a lot. I think he did try to look after me as best he could, but most nights he just ended up passed out in his chair.

That was also when he started spending a lot of time in the shed. I'd never really paid it much attention before. As far as I was concerned, the sturdy wooden structure was just the home of spiders' nests and the rusted garden tools my parents would use once a year to attack the overgrown wilderness that was our back garden. But soon after my mother's disappearance, a sturdy new padlock was placed on the door, and my father spent a lot of time inside.

He told me he was woodworking, and sometimes I'd hear the sounds of power tools from inside, and he'd present me with some small wooden token he had made, but mostly there was silence. It should probably have bothered me more than it did, the hours he spent in there, and that odd smell I sometimes noticed, like tinned meat. But I never really paid it much attention, and I had my own grief to deal with.

He was gone most nights as well. Often, I would wake up from one

of my nightmares to find the house silent and empty. I would look for him and he would be gone. I never despaired at this, for some reason, not like I had when my mother vanished. I knew he would return eventually, when he was finished with what I had decided must be 'police business'. Sometimes I'd lie awake until he returned.

Once, as I lay awake, I heard him come into my room. I pretended to be asleep. I don't know why, but I thought I'd be in trouble if he found out I was awake. He walked over to me and gently stroked my face. His hands smelled strange. Back then I didn't know the scent of blood, and mixed with that faint, saline smell of brackish water. He whispered to me then, when he thought I was asleep, promised to protect me, to make sure that "it wouldn't get me too".

There was a strangled sound to his words; I think he might have been crying. As he left, I opened my eyes just enough to see him. He stood by the door, his face in his hands, wearing light grey overalls that were stained with a thick, black substance. I often wish I'd asked him about that night. I wonder, if he'd known I was awake, if I had asked him in that moment of weakness… Well, it's far too late for that now.

Over the next couple of years, I noticed that my father seemed to be injured quite a lot, and there was rarely a time when he didn't have some sort of plaster, bandage or bruise visible. I'd also occasionally find small blood spots or smears on the floors or tables, especially in the hall. I got very good at cleaning them, and it never occurred to me to pay much attention to where they came from – I just assumed the blood was my father's.

He started staying home during the day, and told me he'd been permanently assigned to the night shift. I believed him, of course, and it was only after his arrest that I discovered that had been the point he'd resigned his job on the police force. I don't know where the money came from after that, but we always seemed to have enough.

Knowing what I know now, it sounds awful to say, but those were some of the happiest years of my childhood. I'd lost my mother, but my father doted on me, and together it seemed like we would get past our pain. I know I've made him sound like an alcoholic recluse who lived in the shed, but those were generally nocturnal activities for him. During the day was time he spent with me.

There was only one time I recall him going into the shed during the day. This was a couple of years after my mother's disappearance, and I must have been about ten. The phone in the kitchen started ringing, and my father was upstairs. I had recently received permission from my father to answer the phone, so I was excited to take up my new responsibility. I picked up the handset and said my memorised phone script into the receiver: "Hello, Montauk residence!"

A man's voice asked to speak with my father. It was a breathy voice, like that of an old man, and at the time I decided he had a German accent, though, when I was young, a lot of different nationalities and accents were lumped together in my mind under the label "German". "What is this regarding?" I asked, as I had a whole phone conversation memorised and wanted to use as much of

it as possible. The man sounded surprised at this and said hesitantly that he was from my father's work. I asked him if he was from the Police and after a pause, he said "Yes". He asked me to tell my father that it was Detective Rayner on the line, with a new case for him.

At this point my father had come down to the kitchen to see who was calling. I told him, and he visibly paled. He took the handset from me and placed it to his ear, not speaking but listening very intently. After a moment, he told me to go up to my room, as this was a "grown-up" conversation. I turned to leave, but as I was heading up the stairs, the light bulb in the landing blew.

The bulbs in our house broke often – my father said we had faulty wiring – so even at that age, I was quite adept at changing them. So I turned around and headed back downstairs to fetch a new bulb. As I approached the cabinet where we kept them, I heard my father's voice from the kitchen. He was still on the phone and he sounded angry. I heard him say, "No, not already. Do it yourself." Then he went very quiet and listened, before finally he said okay, that he'd do it as soon as possible. He put down the phone, then went over to the cupboard and poured himself a drink. He spent the rest of the day in the shed.

The one question they kept asking me over and over during the investigation into my father was whether I knew where the rest of the bodies were. I told them the truth, that I had no idea. They claimed they wanted to confirm the identities of the victims, which they couldn't easily do with what was left.

I didn't know where the bodies were, but I also didn't tell them of the other way they might have identified the victims: my father's photographs. I didn't say anything, because I had no idea where he kept them, and I thought it would only make things worse if they couldn't find them, but, yes, my father took photographs.

During those five years, I had gradually started to notice more and more canisters of photograph film left around the house. This puzzled me since, though my dad and I did sometimes go on short holidays, we never took a lot of pictures. Asking him about it, my father told me he had been trying to learn photography, but didn't trust developers not to ruin his films, as he'd apparently had problems before.

I suggested he make himself a darkroom for developing them himself. I'd seen one in *Ghostbusters 2* on TV the previous Christmas, and loved the idea of having a room like that. His face lit up, and he said he'd convert the guest bedroom. He then warned me that once it was done, I could never go in there without his supervision – there would be lots of dangerous chemicals. I didn't care; I was just so glad that an idea of mine had made my father so happy.

That summer, my father converted the guest bedroom into a darkroom for developing photographs. Like the shed, it was locked almost all the time, but occasionally my father would take me inside and we'd develop photographs of cars or trees, or whatever else a ten- or eleven-year-old with a camera takes pictures of. Mostly, though, my father worked in there alone, and kept the door locked while he did. He seemed almost happy those last couple of

years.

I didn't have an unsupervised look inside until a few weeks before my father was caught. It was a Saturday evening in late autumn, and my father was out of the house. I spent the day watching TV and reading, but as it started to get dark, I found myself bored and alone. Passing by the door to what was now the darkroom, I noticed that the key was still in the lock.

I sometimes think back to that day, and wonder if my father left it deliberately. He'd been so careful for so many years, and then he just forgot? I knew about the dangers, but something inside me couldn't resist going in.

There were no photos stored there. To this day, I don't know where my father kept his developed pictures. But there were about a dozen images hung out to dry. They're still vivid in my mind – black and white and washed in the deep red of the darkroom. Each photo was of a person's face, close up and expressionless, their eyes were dull and glassy.

I had never seen corpses before, so didn't really understand what I was looking at. On each face were thick black lines that formed these symbols that I didn't recognise, but they were clearly drawn on the faces themselves, not just on the photographs. I don't remember the symbols in any great detail, I'm afraid, just the faces that they were drawn onto, though they weren't people I recognised. Nor did they match any of the photos the police showed me later.

I never went back in the darkroom after I closed and locked the door behind me that day. I spent the next weeks wondering if I should tell my father what I had seen. I didn't know what I had seen – not really – but it felt like a bad secret, and I didn't know what to do.

Finally, I decided to tell him. He was drinking on the sofa at the time, and he turned off the television as soon as I mentioned going into the darkroom. He didn't say a word as I told him what I'd seen, just looked at me with an expression on his face I'd never seen before. When I was finished, he stood up and walked towards me, before taking me in his arms and giving me the last and longest hug I would ever get from him. He asked me not to hate him, and told me it would soon be over, then turned to go. I had no idea what he was talking about, but when I asked, he just said that I needed to stay in my room until he got back. Then he left.

I did what I was told. I went up to my room and lay in bed, trying to sleep. The air was heavy somehow, and in the end I spent the night staring out of the window at the street below. I was waiting for something, though I didn't know what.

I remember it was 2:47 in the morning that it started. I finally had an alarm clock, and the image of it is still clear in my memory. I was thirsty, and went downstairs to get a glass of water. I turned on the tap, but what flowed out was a thick stream of muddy brown, brackish water. It smelled terrible, and I froze as I remembered the last time that had happened. My father still wasn't home, and I went into the living room to watch desperately out of the window,

looking down the street for his return. I was terrified.

As I stared down the road, I was struck by how small the puddles of light were from the streetlamps made, stretching far into the distance. But not as far as they should've gone. There were fewer lights than there should be, I was sure of it. Then I saw the light at the end of the road blink off. There was no moon out that night, and all the houses were quiet; when the streetlights stopped, there was nothing but black. The next closest streetlight failed. Then the next. And the next. A slow, rolling blanket of darkness, making its unhurried way towards me. The few lights still on in the houses along the road also disappeared as the tide approached. I just sat there, unable to look away. Finally, it reached our house, and all at once the lights were gone and the darkness was inside.

I heard a knock on the front door. Firm, unhurried and insistent. Silence. I did not move. The knocking came again, harder this time, and I heard the door rattle on its hinges. As it got louder it began to sound less and less like a person knocking and more like… wet meat being slammed into the sturdy wood of the front door.

I turned and ran towards the phone. Picking it up, I heard a dial tone, and would have cried with relief if I wasn't already crying with fear. I dialled the police, and as soon as they picked up I started to babble about what was happening. The lady on the other end was patient with me, and kept on gently insisting I give her the address until finally I was composed enough. Almost as soon as I had told her where I was, I heard the door begin to splinter. I dropped the phone and ran towards the back of the house. As I did

so, I heard the front door burst behind me and I heard a… growl – it was rumbling, deep and breathy like a wild animal, but had a strange tone to it that I've never been able to place. No matter where I turned, it sounded like it came out of the darkness right behind me. I didn't have time to think about it as I ran into the back garden, and into a light that I did not expect. There in front of me was the shed. It glowed, a dull, pulsing blue from every crack and seam. I didn't stop, though, as I heard again that growl behind me, and I ran towards it and pulled at the door.

The shed was not locked that night, and to this day I don't know if I regret that fact. The first thing I saw when I opened that door was my father, bathed in the pale blue light. I couldn't see any source for the glow, but it was so bright. He was knelt in the centre of an ornate chalk pattern scrawled on the rough wood of the floor. In front of him lay a man I didn't know, but he was clearly dead – his chest had been cut open, and still gaped and bled feebly. In one hand my father held a wicked-looking knife, and in the other, he held the man's heart.

My father was chanting, and as the song rose and fell, the heart in his hand beat to its rhythm, and the blue light brightened and dimmed in time. I looked at the walls, and noticed that they were covered in shelves, each of which contained glass jars, full of what I would later learn was formaldehyde containing a single heart – which also beat in time with the one that dripped in my father's hand. It was an odd thing to notice at the time, but I remember that the dead man wore the same pendant as my mother – a silver hand

with a closed eye design.

I don't know how long I stood there staring. It might have been hours or it might have been only a moment or two. But then I heard that growl behind me and sensed a presence so close that I could feel the darkness on my back. Before I could react or move or scream, my father's chant came to a crescendo and he plunged the dagger into the beating heart. All at once, the presence vanished, and the blue glow died. I could no longer hear the beating of the hearts. In the silence, I realised I could hear police sirens in the distance. I heard my dad tell me he was sorry, and then he started to run.

You know the rest. Manhunt, trial, prison, death. They say there were 40 hearts kept in that shed, not including his last victim, but of course the police didn't arrive until all that was left of it was a grisly trophy cabinet. Whatever I had seen my father doing in there, its effects had long since vanished. I don't know why my father did what he did, and I doubt I ever will, but the more I go over these events in my head, the more sure I am that he had his reasons.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

There's not much more to be added here. The police reports on Robert Montauk are predictably thorough, and there are few details to be added. The vast majority of research into this case has already been done by the serial killer enthusiast community which, though

weird and deeply unsettling, does often prove to be surprisingly useful in high-publicity cases like this.

In addition to the body of one Christopher Lorne, 40 preserved hearts were recovered from Robert Montauk's shed. They were arranged on the walls on individual shelves forming patterns of eleven hearts on each inner wall and seven on the wall with the door. Photos of the patterns match up to the various formulae of sacred geometry but don't appear to correspond exactly with any specific school. Of possible significance also is that fact that the rest of the bodies were never found.

The symbol on the two pendants is that of the Peoples' Church of the Divine Host, a small cult that grew around the defrocked Pentecostal minister Maxwell Rayner in London during the late eighties and early nineties. I knew I recognised the name from Statement 1106922 though, currently, it just looks like a coincidence.

Christopher Lorne was a member of the church, and his family hadn't heard from him in the six years prior to his murder. Mr. Rayner himself disappeared from public view sometime in 1994, and the group fragmented shortly afterwards. The police made many attempts to follow up on this lead in the Montauk case, but were never able to locate any members willing to make statements.

The house on York Road is still inhabited, though the current owners pulled down the shed over a decade ago and replaced it with a patio.

Robert Montauk died in Wakefield Prison on November 1st 2002. He was stabbed forty-seven times and bled out before anyone found him. After reading this statement, three points of interest occur: no culprit or weapon was ever found connected to the killing; he was apparently alone in his cell at the time, which was supposed to be locked; and at the time of his death the light bulb in his cell was found to have blown out, leaving him in darkness.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG010 – Vampire Killer

Statement #0100710

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Trevor Herbert, regarding his life as a self-proclaimed vampire hunter. Original statement given July 10th, 2010. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Right then. Been almost 50 years I've been meaning to pay you people a visit and get this down on paper, but I finally got here. So where to start? My name is Trevor Herbert, like I put at the top of your form there, and I've been homeless for most of my life. In fact, if you lived in Manchester, there's a good chance you'd have heard of me.

They call me "Trevor the Tramp". I mean, I'm not exactly easy to miss, am I, and I've been living there in public view for so long I guess I've become kind of an institution. Helps that I've always had a kind of uncanny knack for guessing people's ages. People will

come up to me on the street and ask me to guess their age, and I'll tell them and most of the time they'll be shocked when I get it right. It's fun. So everyone around Manchester knows about Trevor the Tramp, sure. I hear someone even made me a page on the Internet and it got a few thousand likes. I don't know exactly what that means but it sounds nice.

Obviously that's not why I'm here, though, is it? No, I'm here because I have also dedicated my life to finding and killing vampires.

I have killed five people that I know for sure as vampires, and there are two more that may or may not have been. There is one man I have killed, unfortunately, who I am now sure was human, but I also know he was a violent criminal so I try not to feel too badly about that. I'm sure it's hard to accept for anyone, even an organisation such as yourselves, but I do not have proof to give you except for the vampire teeth that I will leave with this statement.

Do not feel bad about reporting me to the police for the murders, as I am sure you must, since I have recently received a diagnosis of late-stage lung cancer, and it is doubtful I will be living much longer anyway. That is the main reason for finally putting down on paper the details of the mission I have been secretly undertaking for the last half a century.

I killed my first vampire in 1959. At that point I was still living a mostly normal life, save perhaps for the abuse my family was subject to from my father. He was a vile man who ended up killing

my mother in ‘56. It was a clear-cut case of drunken murder, but the courts ruled it as an accident, and my father stayed out of jail. Luckily, myself and my brother only had to endure four months of unpleasantness from him before he finally finished drinking himself to death. I was thirteen, when he finally died, and my brother was fifteen. Following his death, there were several attempts to rehome us as orphans, but they always split us up, and we couldn’t be doing with that, so we’d generally run away. After a while, it became so we were happier finding our way on the streets than in another stranger’s home.

It was in autumn of 1959 that we were taken in by Sylvia McDonald. It wasn’t any sort of official fostering agreement, but it was getting to be quite cold at the end of October, and it just saw us shivering in a side street next to the Kings Arms Hotel, as it was back then, on Tipping Street before the ring road took it over. Looking back, I believe it to have been visiting the pub for the purposes of locating down and outs for use as victims, and in my brother and myself, I must say, it successfully found some.

It looked like an older woman, a widow I assumed, from the way it dressed in black and had a strange manner, which I now know to be the mark of the vampire, but back then I paid no attention to it. Many of the older folks had lived through both wars, and it was not uncommon for them to be somewhat strange. I thought this was the case with Sylvia McDonald, and after a small amount of discussion, my brother and I agreed to the offer of food and shelter.

Let me say a little bit about the vampire’s manner, because once I

taught myself to read, I read as much on the subject as I could, and it isn't covered often or clearly in those books I have found. You see, from my own observations, I believe a vampire to be more like an animal than a man. That is not to be taken as merely a turn of phrase, but more to do with how they work. I do not believe vampires are human in anything more than their appearance, nor have I ever seen evidence that they create more of their kind through feeding.

One thing that should be noted is that they do not speak. In fact, they are in my experience totally silent, having no need for air and no room in their throats for a windpipe. They are able to make themselves understood, however, with absolute clarity, though the manner through which they do so has never been clear to me. When Sylvia McDonald came to us in the alleyway that day, we understood that was the name it gave itself and that we were being offered a meal and a bed, even though it never uttered a single sound.

More than that, I do not recall the fact that it never said a word as striking either of us as strange in the slightest. I have never fully understood how they are able to do this, and I doubt that I ever shall, but I can only assume it to be some instinctive form of hypnosis or mind control.

Another misconception I have always faced when trying to discuss vampires is that people think they cannot go out during the day. They can. While I have witnessed them avoid direct sunlight if possible, and wear generally more covering clothes when moving

around during the daytime, they seem to have no significant problem doing so. I would describe them as weaker during the day, but whether this is scientifically due to the sunlight, or simply because evil has less power in the daylight hours is unclear to me. Sylvia McDonald came to us on an overcast afternoon, and enough of its pale flesh was uncovered that, were sunlight to truly harm a vampire, then it would likely have been destroyed.

On that afternoon, my brother Nigel and I agreed to go back to the house of Sylvia McDonald in the hopes of a roof over our heads for a little while. She lived on Loom Street, which is still there, though the house itself was torn down long ago, and there's just a bit of scrubland now where it used to be. I sometimes go there to pay my respects, since my brother has no burial or grave I can visit.

The house was old, even when I went there in 1959, and entering it I was hit by a stale, coppery smell that I did not recognise as old blood at the time, since I was barely 16 and did not have then the experience I have now. The furniture and wallpaper had clearly not been changed in many decades, and a thick layer of dust covered everything.

Even the floor was pale with dust, except for a stark line where Sylvia McDonald moved, the train of its dress dragging behind it. I remember wondering whether Sylvia McDonald walked exactly the same route through the house always, as I saw other clear lines of passage in the rooms we passed through. None of the furniture looked used, and when I picked up a book from one of the shelves, the pages were solid with damp and mould. I began to feel very

uneasy at this point, but whatever powers of persuasion the vampire had calmed me enough to continue following it with my brother.

We went up the stairs, and I was led to a small room with a bed in it. I was made to understand that this would be my room, and was left there as Sylvia McDonald led my brother away to the room next to it. When it returned, it brought a bowl of fruit and offered it to me. The fruit was clearly a few weeks old, and in various stages of rotting, but just to appease the thing I found an apple and a couple of grapes that seemed edible and I ate them. It watched me silently the whole time, and then turned and walked out towards Nigel's room.

By this time, whatever the creature had done to make me compliant seemed to be starting to wear off, and I was realising just how wrong everything was. I was also realising that it didn't look like there was any easy escape from the house. All the windows I had seen were barred, and I recalled Sylvia McDonald had locked the sturdy-looking front door behind it after we had all entered. So instead, I just laid down in the old musty bed and I waited.

Couldn't rightly say what I was waiting for, but soon enough it got dark, and I assumed Sylvia McDonald had gone to sleep, not yet realising the manner of being that I was dealing with. I wanted some light to comfort me, but the old house seemed to have no electricity at all, so I used my cigarette lighter on a candle I found next to the bed and crept towards the door. It wasn't locked, thankfully, and I left the room assigned to me and walked over to

where I believed my brother was.

I went in and found him lying in his own bed, pretending to sleep. After a bit of talk, it became clear that Nigel was no happier with our situation than I was, and we both resolved that another night on the cold streets was better than staying with this strange woman. As we talked through possible ways to escape, however, we heard a rustling sound outside the door, and the handle began to turn. Not wanting to anger our strange host, I crawled under the bed to hide, while Nigel returned to pretending to sleep.

From my vantage point under the bed, I could see the door open, and the skirt of Sylvia McDonald enter and move towards the bed. I simply laid there and tried not to make a sound. I am not proud of this, and sometimes have a certainty that my inaction led directly to my brother's death, but most of the time I accept that, if I had alerted the vampire to my presence, then I would also have died.

Either way, the fact of the matter is that I did nothing as I heard the sounds of a struggle overhead, and Nigel's strangled cry. The creature turned quickly and hurled him down, something fell to the floor in front of me, but I didn't look at it, my eyes locked on Sylvia McDonald as it pounced upon my brother. It opened its mouth for what I then realised was the first time since we met it, and I could see nothing inside save for a dozen long, thick, pointed teeth like a shark.

In one fluid movement, it plunged those teeth into my brother's neck and tore out a great chunk of flesh. Blood started to spurt from

Nigel's spasming body, as Sylvia McDonald's throat began to twitch. Its jaw detached and a long tubular tongue about the thickness of my forearm snaked out of its throat and clamped onto the gushing wound. There was an awful slurping sound, the first noise I'd ever really heard the creature make, as the tongue sucked the blood from my brother's throat.

I just lay there watching as its stomach began to distend and swell, the now bulbous belly straining against the black dress it wore. After the longest ten minutes of my life, the vampire finished. Its tongue retracted back into its throat, still dripping blood onto the now-pale corpse of my brother, and it lay back upon the floor, apparently contented.

As this had been happening all my energy had gone towards not screaming or giving away my presence. But as the vampire lay satiated on the floor, I turned my attention to what had fallen from Nigel's hand when he had been dragged out of the bed. It was his pocket knife. I had no idea what a small knife like that would do against a creature that seemed far stronger and faster than me, but I didn't see any option other than to try.

I moved so slowly as I reached for the knife that at times it seemed like I wasn't moving at all. I was worried that the creature would spot me and strike as it had with Nigel, although I now know that smell is in fact the vampire's major sense and, with all the blood around, there was little chance of it detecting my scent.

Grasping the knife in my hands, I crept over towards the creature as

it placidly digested my brother's life, until I stood over it. I felt a sudden surge of rage and adrenaline come over me and with a speed and strength I never knew I had, I plunged the knife into Sylvia McDonald's blood-bloated stomach.

It burst like a sick balloon, and blood began to pour out. The creature's eyes shot open and it clutched at the wound desperately. Its throat was not capable of uttering a scream but its face displayed a silent pain and anger as it flailed on the floor. Stumbling back, trying to wipe the blood from my eyes, I felt an unexpected burning in my hand. I realised I'd touched the still-lit candle on the bedside table.

I don't know what I expected to happen when I grabbed the candle and pressed it to the dry part of Sylvia McDonald's dress. I was just trying to find anything else I could do to harm it before it could recover from its split belly. But I certainly didn't expect it to catch like dry tinder. The fire spread quickly over its repulsive form, though it did slow somewhat where the clothing or flesh was still moist with blood. It struck me that the vampire must be a very dry creature when not fresh-fed and engorged. Perhaps I had struck before the liquid could spread throughout its body.

Whatever the reason, Sylvia McDonald was alight, and to such a degree that the rest of the room was starting to catch fire as well. I was distraught at the idea of leaving this house without my brother, but he was clearly dead, and I needed to escape.

I recalled the vampire had been carrying a handbag when we first

met it, and had used a key from it to lock the front door. It did not have the handbag with it now, though, so I began to desperately search the other rooms of the house, trying to find it. I did find it in the end, in what I assume to be the vampire's bedroom. I'll not describe it in detail, except to say that it appears to be where the creature took most of its meals. Hopefully that makes the picture clear enough for you. I found the key, though, and escaped that house before the fire did me any serious damage. I was terrified of the police coming and thinking I was a murderer, so I didn't stick around. I just fled into the night.

It was almost a decade before I encountered another vampire. I'd been living on the streets all that time, occasionally in and out of various institutions, and had just about managed to convince myself that Sylvia McDonald had just been a bad reaction to the stress of watching my brother's murder. It was in the late 60s that I learned different.

It was 1968, I remember because that was the year United won the European Cup, and I did quite well out of it – people being generous to begging when they're happy over a sports win. On a Friday night, I would generally spend my time around the Oasis Club in Lloyd Street, and hit up for change anyone who was slightly the worse for drink. Well, this night in particular I was doing quite well, as it was a warm June evening not too long after the Cup Final, and everyone was in a good mood.

Now, about half eleven that night, I spied a stranger all turned out for dancing, making his way from the club with a lady friend. I

reckoned they might be good for a tanner, so I made my approach. I gave them the spiel and waited. The man looked at me and I understood he wouldn't be giving me any money, and I stepped away. It was as he turned to leave I realised that he hadn't opened his mouth, and memories of Sylvia McDonald came rushing back to me in a flash.

I wasn't sure what to do, so I followed behind them at a distance. I didn't try to hide or disguise myself, as I had long since learned, and it's true now as it was back then, that no-one pays any real attention to a tramp. As I watched, I saw the clearly drunken woman asking this stranger questions, and each time he'd just look at her, and she'd smile as though he'd given some reassuring answer, and stumble on behind him. All the while he never once opened his mouth.

I didn't rightly know what to do about this. I had no weapon save my brother's old pocket knife which I had kept sharp all these years, and while I was pretty sure of what I was seeing, I was still hesitant to attack with no provocation and no plan. As we walked, I kept an eye out for any discarded wood or timber and, sure enough, noticed a broken wooden palette partially sticking out of a bin. I grabbed a long shard and used my knife to quickly hack it to a point, ignoring the splinters. While I had not, at that time, done much research into the creatures I faced, believing as I did my experience as a youth to be the product of a disturbed mental state, I was still aware of their supposed weakness to wooden stakes.

I had now followed the vampire, who I would later find out called

itself Robert Arden, and its victim back to the building where it apparently lived. It let itself in the front door and the woman followed. I wasn't fast enough to get in before the front door closed and obviously didn't have a key, so I went round the windows and, luckily, it seemed the vampire lived on the ground floor.

I watched through the window as it led its victim into a sparsely-furnished living room. I couldn't see any obvious signs of previous slaughter, but I remembered how cleanly Sylvia McDonald had sucked up all the blood from my brother, so this did not strike me as odd. I gently tried the window, and found it locked, so searched the garden for the heaviest stone I could find, and watched what was happening inside. I had to be sure. Soon enough, Robert Arden moved smoothly behind its now-seated prey, and finally opened its mouth to reveal those rows of shark-like teeth I knew would be there.

I hurled the rock I held through the window, showering the room with broken glass, and causing the woman to scream in shock. Robert Arden raised its head in surprise and for one moment our eyes locked and I knew I had made a terrible mistake. The woman looked at her monstrous companion and, seeing his now open mouth, screamed her terror even louder.

In a single movement, far quicker than I expected, Robert Arden was through the window and on me. I struggled and fought, but it was far stronger than I was, and I could barely keep its jagged teeth from finding my throat. It was the first and last time I ever touched a vampire's skin with my own. The flesh was cold and spongy, like

the inside of a bruised apple, and I felt bile rise in my throat even as I fought for my life.

Finally, its teeth bit into my neck. Not enough to kill me outright but with enough force to cause the blood to flow. At that moment I saw a sort of frenzy enter the eyes of Robert Arden and with a spasm its leech's tongue surged from its throat and I felt it attach to my neck. I do not know if you've ever felt your blood being sucked out of you, but I would not recommend it.

Now it is at this point I have something of an admission to make. For the three years preceding this event, as well as on and off through the years since, I have had a relationship with the drug heroin. I tried it for the first time shortly after Nigel's death and since then I have periodically relapsed. I have always tried to keep this a secret, as I am aware that I have a certain reputation to uphold and I would not want it to be damaged with the revealing of my addiction. But it is important to this account, as I believe it was whatever heroin still remained in my system that night that caused the vampire Robert Arden to remove its tongue from my neck and start to shake, as though having a violent choking fit.

I lay there, trying to compose myself enough to fight back, when I became aware of the screaming. The woman, who had been brought in as a victim, was standing over the flailing Robert Arden, stabbing it repeatedly with a kitchen knife. Strong and quick as it was, the vampire didn't seem to be able to cope with the sudden onslaught of violence, and was on the ground. This gave me the precious seconds I needed to get to my feet and locate my

improvised wooden stake. I took aim, and plunged it into where I believed the thing's heart should be. It was easier than I thought it would be – the chest was soft and yielding and there didn't seem to be any ribcage to stop the blow. Robert Arden went rigid and froze, apparently unable to move its body, though I saw its eyes darting around wildly.

It was at that point the woman, whose name I never discovered, dropped the knife and ran. I never saw her again, but she had already saved my life. I took out my cigarette lighter and set Robert Arden alight. Like Sylvia McDonald before it, it caught fire in a matter of seconds and, by the time the police arrived, there was nothing left but a small patch of scorched tarmac. I was lucky that night, and nobody saw anything or called the police before I was finished and had made my way from the scene, but I was always more careful after that.

Following that night, though, I was never again worried that I might have been wrong about the existence of vampires. I always kept my eyes open for them, although sometimes I was too eager, as was the case of Alard Dupont, who I killed in 1982, and later discovered was a human. It is my belief that they are very rare, and feed only infrequently, as all evidence I have seen points to their feeding being fatal. If there were many vampires, or if they ate often, the number of disappearances would quickly become noticeable to the rest of society.

I do not know what they do with the bodies of their victims, and this has always perplexed me, as they do not have any mechanism

for eating solid food, and I do not believe there are many, if any, cases of murder where the body is found completely without blood. I certainly do not think they rise as vampires themselves, as the vampire population seems far too small for this to be a possibility.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

According to Martin, who was here when they took this statement, it was at this point in writing that Mr. Herbert announced he needed some sleep before continuing. He was shown to the break room where he went to sleep on the couch. He did not awaken; unfortunately succumbing to the lung cancer right there. Martin says the staff had been aware of how serious Mr. Herbert's condition was, and had advised him to seek medical aid prior to giving his statement, but were told rather bluntly by the old man that he would not wait another second to state his case. I can't decide whether this lends more or less credibility to his tale.

Regardless, there is substantial evidence to support the version of events told by Mr. Herbert in all aspects except the vampirism. There is a news report of a 1959 fire that consumed a house on Loom Street and apparently claimed the life of an 18-year-old boy, although no mention is made of the homeowner. And a police report from 1968 confirms the disappearance of Robert Arden in Manchester amid circumstances of violence, including a broken window and signs of a fire, though no human remains were found.

There is also a murder report concerning one Alard Dupont, whose partially-burned corpse was found in his home on August 2nd, 1982. Unfortunately, Mr. Herbert was never able to give details of others, so we cannot corroborate further.

There was, however, a small bag left on top of this statement, which appears to contain six shark teeth of varying sizes. According to correspondence with the Zoology Department at King's College, they didn't match any currently known species.

Personally, I don't know what to think. I certainly don't believe in wild tales of vampirism, but I can't help but notice that the statement above appears to be a photocopy of a photocopy, and can't find these supposed vampire teeth anywhere in the Archives or the Secure Containment Room. I don't know where the originals are, but the file number is listed among multiple information requests from the Institute's government and law enforcement contracts. It may be that they take Mr. Herbert's statement far more seriously than I do.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG011 – Dreamer

Statement #0151403

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Antonio Blake, regarding his recent dreams about Gertrude Robinson, previous Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute. Original statement given March 14th, 2015. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, current Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

First off, I should admit that I lied to get in here. I know your criteria are very clear: “Any supernatural or unexplainable experience or encounter occurring within the realms of apparent reality. No out-of-body experiences, visions, hallucinations or dreams”. And this is about dreams, make no mistake, but I think you need to hear it anyway. Whether you believe it or not, well, that’s up to you. I just don’t feel like I could rightly go on my way without at least trying to explain myself.

You see, I had a dream about **you.**

I know how that sounds, and I can assure you we don't know each other, but the Institute, the building, even this room… I saw them in my dream as clearly as I see them here before me now. So no, I don't have any tale about a shambling horror in the dark. I ask you to read on, though, as this wasn't the sort of dream you just ignore.

I should probably give a little bit of background about myself rather than just gibbering about dreams and prophecies. I've lived in London for almost a decade now. I came here to do my undergraduate degree at the London School of Economics. I ended up taking a position with Barclays shortly after graduating and did well enough there. It didn't last long, though; I barely made it through a full year before the stress of my new job, not to mention some problems in my personal life, led to me having a full nervous breakdown. I'd broken up with Graham, my boyfriend of six years and had to leave the home we shared, going to stay with some of the few friends that had survived my year of stress-fuelled outbursts and constantly cancelled plans.

It was there, sleeping on my friend Anahita's sofa, in the depths of my misery, that I first started to have the dreams. I found myself standing atop the very peak of Canary Wharf and overlooking the Barclays building where I had spent so many hateful hours. Behind me I could feel the pulsing beat of the light that stands atop that looming tower; it thrummed through me and I could see the glow pass across my skin like oil but, try as I might, I could not turn around to look at it.

It was then that I noticed that there was something wrong with the

city below me. It was dark, lit by the sickly orange glow of the streetlamps and there too something pulsed oddly. Looking down I could see a web of dark tendrils criss-crossing the streets and crawling up the buildings. They were like blood vessels, thick and dark, some as wide as roads and some as thin as a telephone wire, and they all throbbed in time with the beat of light behind me. I needed to get closer.

Lucid dreaming has never been a skill I've possessed, and I generally get swept along in the current of whatever runs though my sleeping consciousness. So it came as something of a surprise when my wordless desire to get closer became manifest and I moved forward. Even more surprising was that my forward motion brought me over the edge of Canary Wharf's roof and I fell. I plummeted, I don't know how far, until I hit the ground with a crack. I would have expected this to wake me but instead I simply lay there, spasmed by dream-pain, you know, the knowledge of pain without the white heat of nerves. After some while – who can say how long in sleep – I became standing again, and started to move through that veined orange hellscape that I knew to be the City.

As I moved – I will not say walked, for that would not be quite correct – I saw people. Not many, and not moving, but they were there. They leered like photographs, overexposed and washed out, caught and immortalised in a single instant. Each had those tendrils wrapped around them, pulsing against their stillness.

One had a thin black vein that snaked around her arms and

appeared to vanish into where her heart would sit. Another, an older gentleman in a dark blue suit, laid on the ground with a beating mass the size of a tree trunk crushing his legs. On the face of each and every person I saw was that same rictus of surprise, pain and terrified confusion. I had never dreamed like this before, and I knew there was something in it beyond my own reeling consciousness.

Eventually my wandered drifting led me back to the Barclays building. Something inside me wanted to go inside, to see what it was like in this rhythmic, fleshy dreamscape. The lights were on, but like they were a sodium-vapour orange like those outside, and as with all the other lights their brightness pulsed in and out in that beating world, which seemed to rule over all this place.

The desks were set up as I knew them to be but there were no people that I could see. I took the stairs, as something about the thought of riding the lift filled me with a cold dread. It was 23 floors to the office where I worked but if I even had legs in this place they were not what carried me up that stairwell. It was there I found my own desk, clear and empty as I had left it some weeks before.

I then knew all at once that there was something in the small office next to me. I felt it in the rhythm of my dream, and I carried myself across to see. It had been the office of my old line manager, John Uzel, and he was inside. One of the dark black veins had snaked in through the window and seemed to have suspended John two feet from the floor, wrapped lightly around his throat. Like all the others

he was still, an image held in place, dangling and hanged by this pulsing mass of otherness.

I awoke at that point. Normally, a nightmare would leave me a sweating, wide-eyed mess, but that morning I felt invigorated. It came to me that, while the dream had in all ways appeared as nightmarish, I had never felt any true discomfort. Even my fall at the beginning had been curiously lacking in any true distress. I tried to put it from my mind as I searched through the jobsites, but something about the dream lingered, like a foul odour you only smell when you've stopped thinking about it.

I hadn't seen John Uzel in several months – he had left the company some time before my breakdown, and I had never known him that well, but the image of his face in my dream wouldn't leave me, so I resolved to find out why he had returned to my mind in such an odd manner. For whatever reason, the idea that there might be no cause for his appearance, that it may be entirely incidental, never occurred to me.

I had been offered the chance to return to Barclays after my rather dramatic departure, once my mental health was in a better state, but at that point I couldn't even take the Docklands Light Railway, as I'd get a panic attack whenever the train hit Poplar and the looming figure of the Barclays building and Canary Wharf came into view. I had declined the offer, but I still kept in contact with some of my now ex-colleagues, so emailed a few of them to see if they knew how to get in touch with my old manager. It didn't take long to find out the truth – John Uzel had apparently hanged

himself following the loss of a bitter custody battle with his ex-wife.

I'm sure I don't need to tell you that this shook me deeply. Again, there was no question to me that it may have been a coincidence. I knew, I still know, that what I saw in my dream deliberately mirrored his fate.

I don't remember my dreams for the next few nights, but I do remember that I had that same dream again the following Saturday. It was the same in every detail, except there were different people. Some remained the same, but others were new or had disappeared, and those that I remembered had faded, like wallpaper left too long in the sun.

Again, I began atop Canary Wharf, with the light pulsing behind me, and once I was down I found myself able to traverse the city at will, watching all the figures wrapped in those throbbing veins. I returned to where John had been, and sure enough, there he remained, though faded to the point where if I didn't know who he was already, I could not have identified him. The tendrils that wrapped his throat were as dark as they ever had been, though.

Knowing now what I did about John, I could see the deaths of each poor soul I saw as I wandered through the dream. The dark vines would clutch the head of the stroke victim, the lungs of a cancerous smoker and would bury the car crash victims under the vastness of their bulk. I did not go towards the hospital, as so many of those thick and rubbery lines led towards it that I could see no space within that was not choked with them.

These dreams have been a regular part of my sleeping for about eight years now. Even as life improved and I found a new job and place to live – believe it or not, I now work selling crystals and tarot cards in a “magic” shop – they continued to crop up a few times each month. If there’s one advantage to working where I do, it’s that I’ve been able to read every book on esoteric dreaming ever written, but none of them even come close to what I have experienced. I tried to make peace with the dreams for some time, reasoning that as long as they caused me no discomfort, they were harmless. This worked fine until I saw my father in the dream, walking down Oxford Street, the pulsing veins climbing up his leg and into his chest.

I tried to warn him of course – asked leading questions on his health and how he was feeling, whether he’d been tired recently. I even went so far as to book him a doctor’s appointment, much to his annoyance. It did no good, though – ten days later, the heart attack came for him, and despite the rapid response of the paramedics and how much of his medical history I had immediately to hand, there was nothing I could do to save him. He died on New Year’s Eve, and as 2014 ended, so did any hope I had of my dreams doing good in the world.

It took a month and a half for my father’s image to fade from the orange glow of the streetlamps in my dream London. And by my estimation he had appeared about ten days before his death. I tell you this because I feel you have a right to know the sort of timescales that we’re dealing with here. I haven’t had much of a

chance to experiment or see anything more specific, I'm afraid. There are so many people who die in London, and I know so few of them.

But I recognise you. As I write these words I can see you in the other room, eyes locked on whatever book you're diverting yourself with; I recognise you from my dreams. They said at the front desk that you review all the written statements, so I can only hope that you take the time to read through this one fully.

Allow me to explain in a bit more detail. It was the night before last that the dream came again. It started as it always did, with me on top of Canary Wharf, but almost immediately I could feel that something had changed. The dull orange glow that thrummed up from below seemed muffled somehow and there was an oppressive knowledge within me that something was deeply wrong. Looking down, I could see that the veins, whose domination of the dreamscape had only ever been partial before, had thickened and now seemed to cover almost the whole space of every street.

They still pulsed as before but rather than pumping their dark, unknown cargo invisibly, there would now sometimes be seen a dark red light that travelled along the inside of them. I thought I saw this red light illuminate faces and shadows within those tendrils but it moved too quickly for me to be sure of any details beyond the direction. This was not something I had ever seen happen before in these dreams, and I was aware that I had two choices: to follow the light to wherever it might lead or to turn and retreat into the waking world. I decided to follow the path of that

scarlet glow, though I found I was floating some distance from the ground, so thick were the vines below.

I followed them for some time; how long exactly I couldn't say. I never seemed to travel faster than walking speed in these dreams and yet the distances I covered as I passed through the orange twilight of this pulsating other-London seemed far further than the time it took to traverse. Such is the way of dreams, I suppose. All I know for sure is that I realised after some time that the red light was leading me towards Vauxhall and the Thames. There were fewer people visible here – did rich people die less? Or perhaps they just had greater control over where they died? Or maybe they just couldn't be seen, fighting off death for so long that when it came at last its icy tendrils covered every inch of them.

I crossed the Thames, and the bridge was knotted high with the flashing vines. One or two of them seemed to pass through the river itself, and the occasional flash of red could be seen beneath the water, but most of them were laid across the bridge. Finally, I saw the destination of the blood-tinged glow. A small building, standing alone on the other side of the bridge near the Embankment. I couldn't have told you what the street was called; the London of my dreams has no street signs. It was old, pillared and possessed of a quiet dignity. It was this building into which all the veins flowed: every door, every window was solid with them. When the bursts of red light passed into it, the whole building glowed crimson. I could see a bronze plaque next to the door, not quite covered. It read: *The Magnus Institute, London. Founded 1818.*

I entered, though I couldn't tell you how. The veins blocked every possible entrance entirely and yet I found myself moving through them. I saw the corridors, these corridors, choked with that shadowed flesh, and passed through them, following that red light that would now pulse so bright that I knew were I to see it awake it would have blinded me. It led me to a room, the label of which was still visible, and read "Archive". I entered to see walls covered with shelves and cabinets stretching off into the distance. These shelves were coated in a sticky black tar, which I knew at that moment was the thickened, pulpy blood that pumped through each and every one of those veins.

At the front of the room stood a desk, and the veins were wrapped around it so tightly and so thick that I knew that this must be where they ended. Getting closer I realised that there was a person sitting at that desk and it was them that all of this scarlet light was flowing into. I could see none of the figure's body beneath the flesh that enclosed them, but as I moved around I saw the face was uncovered. It was your face and the expression upon it was far more fearful than any I had seen in eight years of wandering this twilight city. That was when I awoke.

I'm well aware that I don't even know your name, and I have no responsibility to try and prevent whatever fate is coming for you. Based on my previous experience, such a thing is likely impossible anyway, but after what I saw I couldn't live with myself if I didn't at least try. I did as much research into your Institute as possible, and arranged an appointment to provide a statement about some

spurious supernatural encounter. Even then I was told that the Archivist only reviews the written statements once they have been taken, so here I am, pouring out my lunatic story on paper in the hopes that you might eventually read it.

If you do see this in time and read this far, then to be honest I don't know what else to tell you. Be careful. There is something coming for you and I don't know what it is, but it is so much worse than anything I can imagine. At the very least, you should look into appointing a successor.

Good luck.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

I'm sure I don't need to explain how disquieting it was to find this statement tucked into the recent archives. I'm not… entirely sure whether to bring this up with Elias or not. When he hired me, he was vague on the point of what happened to my predecessor, Gertrude Robinson. I asked if she would be available to train me up for a handover, but he simply said she had passed away and not to worry about it overmuch. Actually, now I think about it, his exact phrase was that she "died in the line of duty", which I had assumed meant having a stroke at her desk or something similar – she was quite elderly, I believe.

I mean, I don't believe in the predictive power of dreams, obviously, but still, it's a deeply unsettling thing to find. I had Tim

look into it, as I don't entirely trust the others not to have written it as a practical joke and slipped it into the archives. Unsurprisingly, he came up with nothing. Antonio Blake is a fake name, and all of the contact details he provided were similarly fraudulent. It's almost certainly a joke, a bit of hazing for the new boss, maybe? Best not to engage with it, I think.

Still, I might have a word with Rosie, to make sure I get a copy of any new statements as soon as they're made, not just once the researchers are done with them. She seemed very open to the idea of recording them, so I'm hopeful she'll be willing to do this, too. If this is genuine, well, I have no idea if Gertrude got the chance to read this statement before she passed away, but if anyone comes in ranting about dreaming my death, then I very much want to hear about it.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG012 – First Aid

Statement #0121102

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Lesere Saraki, regarding a nightshift at Saint Thomas Hospital, London. Original statement given February 11th, 2012. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I'm a nurse at Saint Thomas Hospital, down in Lambeth, near Waterloo Station. Technically these days I work at Guys and Saint Thomas NHS Foundation Trust, but Guys Hospital is at a completely different site the other side of London, so for the sake of clarity, I work at Saint Thomas.

Christmas is one of the worst periods to be working at a hospital, and in the Accident and Emergency department it's even more unpleasant. Pensioners who can't afford to properly heat their homes, drunken party-goers who overindulge and hurt themselves, even just people who didn't look where they were going and slipped

on a patch of ice. Christmas brings out the side of people that always seems to lead them to the hospital, so I was relieved last year when I got my shift pattern and learned my last A&E shift of the season was going to be on the 23rd, two full days before Christmas itself.

That was the good news. The bad news was the 23rd was also the Friday immediately before the big day, and that meant people finishing work for the holidays and going out for some celebration. When you work in Accident and Emergency, there are few words that fill your heart with such dread as the word “celebration”.

That night wasn’t as bad as some I’d seen, a few broken bones and a couple of drug-fuelled injuries, but no fights or angry drunks, which was a blessing. It must have been about half-past one in the morning that the ambulance arrives. They had radioed ahead and we knew that we had a pair of severe burn victims being brought in, so we were as ready as we could have been.

I was heading out to meet the ambulance, when I noticed that the A&E waiting room was totally silent. I looked around, and there were all the people there that I expected to see, some cradling obvious injuries, but none of them made a sound. They continued to stare at their phone, read books, comfort one another, but not one of them spoke. I didn’t have much time to really consider what I was seeing as, at that moment, I heard the ambulance pull up outside and ran off to see to the patient.

By the time I arrived, they were already wheeling him out and the

doctor was assessing his burns. The doctor's name was Kayleigh Grice, and she was a junior doctor at Saint Thomas. She started giving some instructions to myself and the EMTs, but I was struck by how quietly she was speaking to me. She didn't whisper but every word was quiet, as though it was a real effort to get them out. Nobody else seemed to notice, so at the time I assumed the effect was due to my own lack of sleep. I've always had difficulty adjusting to the late nights and this time had been particularly bad.

We finished transferring him to a treatment room, the only available one we had that night, and the doctor and EMTs returned to get the other patient while I began dealing with the burns on the first one.

I'm forty-eight years old, and I have been a nurse for most of them, so I've seen a good number of burns in my time. I was prepared for some deeply unpleasant scenes when the call came in, as bad burns can be some of the nastiest injuries you see working in a hospital. These ones surprised me. They were second-degree, which is severe, but not usually such as to require hospitalisation, except that they appeared to cover his entire body. Every inch of exposed skin showed signs of this burning and, cutting away his clothes, it became apparent that the damage had spread there as well.

Anything hot enough to cause this sort of effect should have damaged his clothing, or even melted them onto the skin in places, but they were utterly unharmed, as though he had been dressed after he'd been burned, or the heat had passed right through his clothes without touching them.

He was a tall man, heavy-set, with the sort of build I associated with an athletic middle age. Any hair he might have had was gone, apparently burned off, and his clothes were a nondescript black suit and white shirt. He didn't scream or cry or moan in pain, and in fact, the doctor had had to check his pulse when he'd come in to confirm he was still alive. He was, but as far as I could tell, he appeared to be sleeping peacefully.

I had just started treatment when the second patient was wheeled in. He was in almost identical shape to the first, except for the fact that the burns seemed to stop at his neck, along a clear line. It was as though he'd been wearing a choker that the damage couldn't get above but his neck was bare. He was smaller than the first man, and younger, I'd guess in his mid-thirties. He was clean-shaven, but had long hair dyed completely black. He wore a similar suit to the older man, except that over the top he wore a long black leather coat, just as undamaged as the rest. It looked new, and I felt quite bad having to cut it off him, but we had to confirm how extensive his injuries were.

Like the first, he was completely covered in almost uniform second-degree burns, except for what at first I thought were small black scorch marks. Looking closer, I saw that they were eyes. Small, tattooed eyes on every one of his joints: his knees, his elbows and even his knuckles, as well as just over his heart. I would have expected the burns to have almost destroyed tattoos that small, but instead they were unblemished, and the skin about a centimetre around each one also didn't seem to have been affected.

To say I was unsettled by this would have been something of an understatement. I barely noticed when Dr. Grice and the EMTs returned. They seemed to be talking normally now, and discussing who these two people were. Apparently, the fire brigade had responded to reports of a blaze in a building site near Saint Mary's churchyard, and had turned up to find the two men lying unconscious. There had been no fire, although the ground they lay on showed several burn marks and a metal bar that had been lying nearby appeared to have bent slightly as if from great heat. The fire service had called out an ambulance, and they had brought the men here.

Apparently, the older one hadn't had anything on him at all – no ID, no phone, no keys, nothing – while the younger man had only a Zippo lighter with an eye design on it, similar to the one tattooed all over him, and a old passport that identified him as Gerard Keay. I never got a look at the passport, but from the way the EMTs were talking about it, I gathered the man was well-travelled.

It was at this point that the EMTs had to head out on another call, and Dr. Grice and I got down to treating the two men, the weirdness temporarily forgotten. Medically speaking, there was nothing abnormal about the burns, and it didn't take as long as I had feared to get them properly cleaned and bandaged. Throughout it all, the two of them didn't stir, and I wondered if they were comatose, but that sort of diagnosis would require a lot more testing, which probably wasn't going to happen that night.

So, having finished giving them what treatment we could, the men

were moved to one of the few wards with bed space, and I returned to working A&E. And, for an hour or so, I forgot about the odd strangers that lay unconscious just a few doors away.

I only noticed them again when I had to pass through that ward heading towards the nearby stockroom for some more gauze. As I walked through, I became aware of a sound coming from the bed of the older burn victim. I never did find out his name. I walked towards him slowly, straining my ears to hear what he was saying.

It was so quiet as to be almost inaudible, but was definitely words, the same words over and over; the more I heard, the more it sounded like most of them weren't in English. The first sounded like "Asak" or "Asag", then "Veepalach" and finally in English "The lightless flame". The last part was very clear, and I assumed he was talking about whatever burned him, but he said it with such intensity that the words made me feel quite uncomfortable. His eyes were still closed and his lips were barely moving.

I started to feel warm, like there was a fever quickly creeping out towards my skin. It wasn't the first time I'd had a reaction like this, though, so I took a moment to centre myself and the feeling receded.

The burned man was still whispering; I might even have called it chanting, and I wasn't entirely sure what to do, so I checked his bandages to make sure they didn't need changing and left to go and continue my shift. If I saw Doctor Grice, which was more than likely, then I could tell her that our mystery burn victim had started

talking. Mostly I just wanted to get out of that room for as long as possible.

It was as I returned to the main Accident and Emergency reception that things started to get really strange. And by really strange, I mean that the reception was completely empty. I don't care how late it gets, and at this point it was nearly three in the morning, the waiting room for A&E is always full, especially on a night like this. I mean, I'd been in there not five minutes before and there were upwards of thirty people but now it was utterly deserted. Even the staff at the admissions desk were gone.

I was freaked out, quite frankly, and started checking through all the examination rooms, the wards next door and the individual patient rooms. All empty, except for those patients physically too sick to move or hooked up to IVs. They lay there sleeping, and part of me wanted to wake them, just to hear the sound of another human being, to not be alone, but like I say it was three in the morning and, weird as this all was, I couldn't justify waking up patients just to put my own mind at ease. I went as far as to make as much noise as possible directly outside their rooms, but they just slept on.

It was as I returned to the waiting room for the third time in as many minutes that I heard it. It sounded like the growl of an animal, a rolling, angry sound, and I realised that the floor was shaking, ever so slightly. I looked around for the source of the noise, I was getting more and more frantic by the second, and then I saw it.

Lined up against the wall of the waiting room were two vending machines. I rarely paid them any attention, as there were better options in the staffroom and one or both of them were usually out of order. But I now saw that the one on the left, a clear-fronted machine that stocked bottled soft drinks, was shaking violently.

As I got nearer, I saw why: in every bottle, in every row of the machine, the drinks appeared to be violently boiling. Cokes and lemonades and fruit juices shook and bubbled, before one by one, the bottles exploded, coating the inside of the clear plastic front with liquid that still kept steaming and hissing. It couldn't have taken more than thirty seconds for all of them to pop, and then the waiting room was silent once again.

At this point, I was just about ready to abandon my shift and leave the hospital. Whatever was going on there, I wanted no part of it. I ran towards the door leading from the A&E to the chill of the December night, not something I would ever have thought I'd look forward to. As I approached, though, I noticed that the plastic at each end of the metal handles was ever so slightly warped. I tentatively touched the back of my hand to them and withdrew it almost immediately – I didn't even have to touch it to feel the intense heat radiating from the door. I almost wept. If I was getting out of there, it wasn't going to be through that door.

I started to make my way back through the wards, heading towards another exit, but as I passed through I could hear the burned man still mumbling to himself, louder now, so that his weird chant was audible even outside of his room. It was starting to get to me. I

went in; I don't know what I was planning to do, I just needed to make him shut up somehow. His eyes were open now, bloodshot behind the bandages and staring blankly towards the ceiling.

At that moment, I decided that I was going to shut him up, even if I had to physically hold his mouth closed. I approached him slowly and reached towards his face.

The second before I could touch him, a hand shot out and grabbed me by the wrist. I turned to see the other burn victim, whose passport had identified him as Gerard Keay, on his feet and shaking his head. His grip on my wrist was far stronger than I would ever have expected from someone that injured, and I could feel a heat through his bandaged hand, like his skin was still burning somehow.

I screamed. Why not? I'd already established no-one was around to hear me. He immediately released my hand and apologised, said he'd only been trying to protect me. I asked him from what and he gestured to the burned man, still lying motionless in his bed, chanting his nonsense phrases. Sparing a glance at his own wrapped form, he said that touching the man would have been a "bad idea". He seemed to be in tremendous pain as he spoke, but did his best to hide it.

I didn't say anything then. I wanted to ask what was happening and it seemed like he was waiting for me to do just that, but something stopped me. Something told me that if there was a coherent explanation for everything that had happened since the ambulance

arrived, then I would be no better off for knowing it.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, Gerard spoke. He asked me if the paramedics had brought any items in with them. Specifically, he was after a small book bound in red leather and a brass pendant he had been wearing. He didn't say what design had been on the pendant but I guessed it had been an eye. I told him that neither of those things had been brought in with him, and he was quiet for a long time.

After the last ten minutes spent desperately wishing for another human being to talk to, I should have been relieved with Gerard's company. But watching him, standing and walking despite the burns covering eighty percent of his body, despite the sheer quantity of painkillers we had given him, he just made me very afraid. Finally he nodded, as though dismissing me, and limped past into the corridor, towards the supply cupboard.

I followed him, asked what he was doing. I got no answer, but he seemed to know the code to the door immediately and strode right in, scanning the shelves for something. He saw what he was after and picked up a small object wrapped in paper and plastic. I recognised it immediately as a sterile scalpel. He was going to kill the chanting man; I could feel it in the way he stared past me as I stood in the doorway.

He started walking towards me. The storage room was not big, and it took him barely a second before he was in front of me, but it was the longest second I have ever experienced as I tried to decide

whether to risk my own life for that of the burned stranger, blankly chanting his unsettling prayer.

Behind Gerard, I saw bottles of saline solution start to bubble and boil. I stepped aside. He nodded in appreciation, and said something that I remember very clearly, even though it still makes no sense. He said, “Yes. For you, better beholding than the lightless flame.”

I didn’t try to stop him as he walked back into the ward. I just stood there and watched as he took out the scalpel, muttered some words I couldn’t make out, and plunged the blade into the centre of the chanting man’s throat. At that moment, there was the sound of sizzling, and a smell like rotten meat on a grill. I watched as the flesh around that wound began to blacken and crack. The bandages curled and disintegrated, and the scorched skin spread over his body like water. There was no fire, and I felt no heat, but over the course of twenty seconds I watched this man’s body cremate itself to ash. Even the scalpel was gone.

Gerard Keay walked over to the bed and, picking up the empty bedpan beneath it, gently swept the ashes into the metal basin and handed it to me, asking me to dispose of it. I took it and numbly walked out, heading towards a medical waste bin.

As I walked the corridor, I noticed a figure at the other end. It was Doctor Grice. I’m not ashamed to admit that I wept in relief as I ran to the waiting room and saw it once again full of people complaining and moaning to themselves. By the time I was finished

and got back to the room, Gerard was lying in his own bed, apparently sleeping. I considered asking him now what had happened, but at that moment another ambulance arrived with three members of a Christmas party that had gotten dangerously out of hand, and just like that, the rest of my shift was gone.

Gerard Keay was treated for a further four days in the hospital before being discharged into the care of his mother. I tried to talk to him about what happened, but he was on a lot of painkillers and never seemed to really register I was there. It may have been feigned, I suppose, but in the end the result was the same.

Since then, I've just tried not to think about it. I've managed to get almost thirty years of nursing under my belt before something like this happened, so with any luck, I'll be long retired by the time anything like it happens again.

I worry sometimes, though. Over the last few months, when I'm alone on the wards, I get the feeling I'm being watched. Not threatened or judged, just watched. I avoid that storeroom, particularly.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

There's obviously a lot to unpack here, so let's start with what is provable. Sasha managed to get access to the hospital records for this period and they do list the admission of Gerard Keay and an unknown male for burn injuries similar to what Ms. Saraki

described. Furthermore, there are only discharge papers for Gerard Keay, and a short police report on the disappearance of the second burn victim. No evidence of foul play was found, and no official missing persons case was ever opened.

As far as the mystery man's chanting goes, if it was indeed "Asag" that he was saying, then that's quite interesting. Asag is the name of a demon in Sumerian mythology associated with disease and corruption, which doesn't really seem to have much relevance to this statement except that it was also fabled that Asag was able to boil fish alive in their rivers. Admittedly, in Sumerian myth this was because he was monstrously ugly, but a curious coincidence nonetheless.

"Veepalach" might also be a mishearing of the Polish word "wypalać", according to Martin, which means to cauterize or brand. Admittedly, if Martin speaks Polish in the same way he "speaks Latin," then he might be talking nonsense again, but I've looked it up and it appears to check out. I can't find anything conclusive on the phrase "the lightless flame," however. It crops up in a lot of different contexts throughout various esoteric literatures.

It has not escaped my notice that this is the second time Gerard Keay has turned up in this Archive. I'd be very keen to get his statement, but unfortunately it looks like he passed away from a brain tumour late last year. We're doing further research into him, though, and if we're lucky maybe we already have a statement from him tucked away somewhere in these damn files.

We contacted Ms. Saraki to see if she wanted to make a follow-up statement, but she declined. Apparently, she still gets the watched feeling occasionally, but aside from that there haven't been any other abnormal occurrences in her professional or personal life.

One final note: Sasha has finally been able to access the hospital's CCTV footage for the night of 23rd December 2011, and it shows something quite startling. I had assumed that there was a significant hallucinatory element to Ms. Saraki's story, and indeed the ward where Gerard Keay was admitted didn't have a camera, but the Accident and Emergency waiting room did. At 03:11:22, it shows everybody in that room, which I personally counted at twenty-eight people, standing up and calmly filing out of the doors. After this, Ms. Saraki can be seen entering and leaving three times, once taking a minute to stare at something beneath the camera, which I assume to be the vending machine. The rest of the staff and patients do not return until 03:27:12, over fifteen minutes after they left, when they walk back in through the same doors. The footage does not contain any sound, and no alarm of any sort was recorded, so I cannot offer any guess as to why they left, or what they were doing in the intervening time.

There is one other thing that Sasha highlighted, however. At 03:22:52, the feed cuts out for less than a second, and is replaced for a single frame by a close-up of a human eye, staring back through the video feed.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG013 – Alone

Statement #0161301

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Right, let's try this.

NAOMI

Really? Does that thing even work? It must be thirty years old.

ARCHIVIST

I know, but we have previously had some success using it to record statements that our… digital recording software struggles with.

NAOMI

Yeah, well, that's one way to put it. You need to get some better equipment.

ARCHIVIST

Believe me, I have been trying. Still, the tape recorder seems to work fine as a backup, and I can have it transcribed later, so for now if you'd be so kind –

NAOMI

You're serious? You actually want me to tell my story into that rattling piece of junk? I see why no-one takes you guys seriously.

ARCHIVIST

You're under no obligation to speak to us.

NAOMI

No, I just… I guess I'm just desperate. The last paranormal investigator I went to laughed at me when I suggested talking to you. Still, I-I guess you have to believe me.

ARCHIVIST

Something like that.

NAOMI

[Sigh] Okay, from where we left off?

ARCHIVIST

Probably best to start over. Name, date, subject, et cetera. I'm not optimistic that any of the previous recording will be salvageable.

NAOMI

Fine. My name is Naomi Herne, and I'm making a statement about the events following the funeral of my fiancé, Evan Lukas. The date is the 13th of January, 2016.

To be honest I'm not even sure I should be here. What happened was weird and, alright, I can't think of a rational explanation for it, but I was distraught. I still am. I should go. I probably just imagined the whole thing. He's gone and that's all there is to it.

ARCHIVIST

That's certainly possible. It might all be in your head, though there is the matter of the stone.

NAOMI

That could be… I don't know. I just don't know what to think.

ARCHIVIST

Take your time.

NAOMI

Wait, where are you going?

ARCHIVIST

I was going to give you some privacy while you make your statement.

NAOMI

Okay, it's just… could you stay please? I don't want to be alone.

ARCHIVIST

Very well. Let's start from the beginning.

NAOMI (STATEMENT)

Alright. I guess the beginning would be when I met Evan. I've never really been the social type. I've always been more comfortable alone, you know? My father died when I was 5 years old, and my mother spent so much time working to keep us fed that I hardly ever saw her. I wasn't bullied in school, or anything like that. I mean, to be bullied you need to be noticed, and I made sure that I wasn't. It was the same in secondary school and even in uni up at Leeds. When everyone was moving out into shared houses for second year, I stayed in a nice cosy room for one in university accommodation. I've always just been happier alone.

Well, maybe happier isn't quite the right word. I did get a bit lonely sometimes. I'd hear laughter coming from other rooms in my building, or see a group of friends talking in the sun outside, and maybe I'd wish I had something like that, but it never really bothered me. I knew my own company and was comfortable with it. I didn't need other people and they certainly didn't need me.

The only person who ever really seemed to worry about it was Pastor David. He worked in the Chaplaincy, and I saw him occasionally when work or stress was getting to me. My mum's a Methodist, and I felt more comfortable talking to him than any of the secular counsellors. He used to tell me it wasn't natural for people to live in isolation, that we were creatures of community by nature. I remember he always used to say that he was "worried I'd

get lost".

Back then, I didn't know what he meant. I think I do now, though.

Anyway, the point is that when I graduated three years ago, I left Leeds with a first in Chemistry and no real friends to speak of. And that was fine by me.

I got a job as a science technician down in Woking. It didn't pay well, and the children were a thick, entitled lot, but it was enough to live on, and kept me close enough to London that I could apply for the various lab jobs that I actually wanted. It was interviewing for one of these where I met Evan.

He was going for the same position as I was – lab assistant in one of the UCL Biochemistry departments. He got the job, in the end, but I didn't care. He was so unlike anyone I'd ever met before. He started talking to me before the interview, and I amazed myself by actually talking back. When he asked me questions, I didn't feel uneasy or worried about my answers, I just found myself telling this stranger all about myself, without any self-consciousness at all. When he was called in for his interview, I actually felt a pang of loss like nothing I'd known before. All for a stranger who I'd met barely ten minutes ago.

When I came out of the building after my own, somewhat disastrous, interview and saw him standing there waiting for me… I don't think I've ever been happier than in that moment.

We went out, and dating gradually turned into living together. I'd

had two boyfriends in the past – both short-lived relationships that ended abruptly. In both cases they said it was because they never really felt like I wanted them around and, looking back, that was kind of true.

With Evan, it was different. It never seemed like his being there stopped me being myself, or crossed into spaces that I saw as my own. Everything about being with him felt so natural that when he told me he loved me, it only came as a surprise to realise that we hadn't said it already.

He had friends, as well, plenty of friends, how could he not? And he would take me out to meet them when I wanted to, and when I didn't, he let me be. After a year with him, I actually had what could perhaps be called a social life and, more than that, I didn't hate it. I always used to roll my eyes at people who said that their loved ones 'completed them', but I honestly can't think of any other way to describe how it felt to be with Evan. I proposed to him after only two years, and he said yes.

I'll skip over the bit where he dies. It's only been a year, and I don't want to spend an hour crying into your crappy tape player. Congenital, they said. Some problem with his heart. Always been there, but never diagnosed. No warning. One in a million chance. Blah. Blah. Blah. He was gone. Just gone. And I was alone again.

There was no-one I could talk to about it. All my friends had been his friends, and once he was gone it didn't feel right to see them. I know, I'm sure they wouldn't have minded, they would have said

they were my friends too, but I could never bring myself to try. It felt more comfortable, more familiar, to be alone, as though Evan had just been some wonderful dream I was now waking up from.

I don't remember the week between his death and the funeral. I'm sure it must have happened, but I don't have any memory of it at all. After leaving the hospital, the next thing that is properly clear in my mind is walking into that big, austere house. I don't remember where it was, somewhere in Kent, I think, and I must have been given the address by someone in Evan's family who had organised the funeral.

It was strange. Evan never really talked about his family. He said he wasn't on good terms with them because they were very religious, and he never had been. I'd never met or visited them, or even been told their names, as far as I remember. But they must have known me enough to invite me, as I somehow ended up at the right place. Just as well they took on the responsibility for the funeral. I was in no fit state to organise anything.

The house was very large, and very old. It had a high gate separating it from the main road, which has the name "Moorland House" carved into the stone of the gatepost. I drove there alone, my old, second-hand Vauxhall Astra complaining all the way. You remember that storm that hit at the end of last March? Well, I hardly noticed it. Thinking back, I really shouldn't have been driving at all, but at the time, it barely registered. The trees were bending ominously when I finally parked at Moorland House, and I immediately lost the only respectful hat that I owned to the wind.

Evan had once told me that his family had a lot of money, and looking at this place I realised why the funeral was being held there. I could see 'round the side what appeared to be a well-kept mausoleum. The last resting place of Evan's ancestors, and soon, I guessed, of Evan himself. This thought set me crying again, and it was in that state, weeping, windswept and soaked through from the rain, that I saw the door open.

I don't know what I expected from Evan's father. I knew he couldn't be anything like the easy, charming man I'd fallen in love with, but the hard-faced stranger that confronted me on the doorstep still came as a shock. It was like looking at Evan, but as if age had drained all the joy and affection from him. I started to introduce myself, but he just shook his head and pointed inside, to a door down the corridor behind him, and spoke the only words he ever said to me. He said, "My son is in there. He is dead." And then he turned and walked away, leaving me shaken, with no option but to follow him inside.

The house was full of people I didn't know. None of the lovely, welcoming faces I'd come to know from Evan's friends could be seen among the dour figures of his family. Each wore the same hard expression as his father, and I might have been imagining it, but I could have sworn that when they looked at me, their eyes were full of something dark. Anger, maybe? Blame? God knows I felt guilty enough about his death, though I have no idea why. None of them spoke to me or to each other, and the house was so quiet and still that at times it seemed like I could hardly breathe under the weight

of the silence.

Finally, I came to the room where he was laid out. Evan, the man I was going to marry, was lying there in a shining oak casket that seemed too big for him, somehow. The coffin was open, and I could see him, dressed in a perfectly tailored black suit. I realised I had never seen him wear a suit before. Like everything else in his death, it seemed utterly alien to the life that had he had created for himself.

I remember going to my father's funeral when I was very young. I remember seeing him lying there, after the undertakers had done their business. My father had looked serene, peaceful, like he had calmly accepted the reality of his passing. It had comforted me, as a child, though it had done little to blunt the acute sense of loss I felt. There was none of that on Evan's face. In death he seemed to have that same hardness and reproach that I saw on every one of the silent family that claimed him for their own.

I don't know how long I stood there. It felt like seconds, but when I turned around I almost shrieked to see dozens of black-clad figures stood there, staring at me. The rest of the Lukas family were standing, waiting without a word, as though I was between them and their prey. Which I suppose, in some ways, I was. Finally, an old man walked forward. He was small and hunched with age, his black suit hanging off his body like sagging flaps of skin. He spoke, "It's time for you to leave. The burial is a family affair. I'm sure you want to be alone."

I tried to reply but the words stuck in my throat. They stood there, waiting for me to respond or to leave, and I realised the old man was right. I did want to leave, to be alone. I didn't care where I went, but I had to go, to get away from that awful place with its strange quiet watchers. I ran past them and out into the storm. Inside my car, I just turned on the engine and began to drive. I didn't know where I was going, and could barely see a thing through my tears and the driving rain, but it didn't matter. Just as long as I kept going, as long as I didn't have to stop and think about what had just happened. Looking back, the only thing that surprises me about the crash is that it wasn't bad enough to kill me.

When I became aware of myself again, I realised I was in the middle of a field, quite a distance from the road. The tracks behind me showed where I had skidded into the dirt. Luckily I hadn't hit anything or flipped over, but smoke billowed from the engine of my poor old Astra, and it was clear I wasn't going anywhere. It was dark, and the time on my dashboard said twelve minutes past eleven. My phone said the same thing. I had arrived at Moorland House at 6 o'clock, as instructed. Had I been driving for hours, or had I spent even longer with Evan's body than I thought? I hadn't hit anything, so I couldn't have been knocked unconscious. Had I just been sitting there in my smoking car all that time?

It didn't matter. The rain was beating down hard, and I needed to get some help. I tried to call the emergency services or use the GPS on my phone, but the screen just said "NO SERVICE". I took a deep breath, trying to stifle panic, and got out the car. I was soaked

through in less than ten seconds, as I struggled through the downpour towards the road. I could hear no sound except for the howling wind, and there were no headlights anywhere to be seen.

Having no idea where I was, I made the decision to turn right and began to walk. I tried to use my phone again, but as I reached into my bag I realised how much of the rain had soaked through. Pressing the power button only confirmed what I already suspected – my phone wasn't working. Anger washed over me, and all the bitterness and rage that had been building over the worst days of my life surged out of me, and I threw the useless lump of plastic at the ground. The corner shattered as it hit the road, then it bounced off the side and disappeared into the thick mud.

I suddenly felt very cold as I stood there in the road. Rain beating down, tears flowing freely, and utterly alone. I kept walking, desperately hoping to see headlights in the distance, but there was nothing but darkness and the steady pounding of the rain on miles of empty countryside in every direction. I didn't have a watch, so without my phone I have no idea how long I walked. The cold bit into my soaked funeral clothes and I shivered, falling to my knees and just about giving up. No cars were coming, and I didn't have the first clue where I was going.

It was then I noticed that the rain had stopped. Wiping the tears from my eyes I saw that a fog had gathered around me, and I could no longer see more than a few feet in front of me. I kept walking, though, as the clinging mist made me feel somehow even colder. The fog seemed to follow me as I went and seemed to swirl around

with a strange, deliberate motion. You'll probably think me an idiot, but it felt almost malicious. I don't know what it wanted, but somehow I was sure it wanted something. There was no presence to it, though, it wasn't as though another person was there, it was… It made me feel utterly forsaken. I started to run, following as much of the road as I could see in the hopes of getting to the other side, but there seemed to be end to it.

I don't know exactly when the hard tarmac of the road became dirt and grass, but I realised after a few minutes that I had strayed off the path. I tried to backtrack, but it was gone. All that remained was the fog and the skeletal outlines of half-glimpsed trees. The dark lines of them bent away from me at harsh angles, but if I tried to approach them then, rather than becoming clearer, the trees would disappear back into the hazy night and I would lose them.

Kneeling down, I was surprised to realise that the ground I was now standing on was not wet. The hard-packed earth was damp from the creeping mist but it did not appear to have been rained on. The despair I felt was quickly turning into fear, and I kept moving forward, further into the fog.

I realised afterwards that the night should have been far too dark to see the fog. There were no lights there to show it, and the moon had been shrouded in storm clouds all night, but despite this I could clearly see it. Shifting, slate-grey and smelling of nothing at all. As I walked I saw more shapes nearby. Dark slabs of stone, sticking out of the ground, leaning and broken. Gravestones. They spread out in all directions, and the gentle blurring of the mist did nothing to

soften the hard weight of their presence. I did not stop to read them.

I kept moving until I reached the centre of what I can only assume was a small cemetery, and there I found a chapel. The top of its steeple was lost in the gloom and the windows were dark. I started to feel relief, as though I might have found some sign of life at last. I began to circle it, moving around to where I assumed the front doors were. As I went I noticed that there was stained glass in the windows but, without any light from inside, I couldn't make out the design. Finally, I came to the front of the building, and I almost lost hope. Wrapped around the handles of the entrance was a sturdy iron chain. I would find no sanctuary here.

I came very close to making a rash decision at that point. I started to shout, to scream for help, but the sound seemed muffled and disappeared almost as soon as it left my throat. No-one heard me, but I continued shouting for some time, just to hear the noise, even if it did seem to die as soon as it touched the fog. It was useless, though, and as I finished I felt the prickling damp flow in and out of my lungs. It was cloying and heavy and I decided I had to do something. I started to look around the ground for the heaviest rock I could find. I was going to get inside that church, even if I had to break a window to do it. Anything to get out of the fog. I was sure that eventually someone would find me.

I noticed that one of the graves had been slightly broken by age, and a small chunk of it could be seen on the ground. It had an engraving of a cross on it, and the weighty lump of stone now lay

embedded in the graveyard soil. I bent down to lift it, but as I did so I saw something that froze me in place. The grave was open. And it was empty.

It wasn't dug up, exactly. The hole was neat, square and deep, as though ready for a burial. At the bottom there was a coffin. It was open, and there was nothing inside. I backed away, and almost fell into another open grave behind me. I started to look around the cemetery with increasing panic. Every grave was open and they were all empty. Even here among the dead, I was alone.

As I stared, the fog began to weigh me down. It coiled about me, its formless damp clung to me and began to drag, pulling me gently, slowly, towards the waiting pit. I tried to back away, but the ground was slick with dew and I fell. My fingers dug into the soft cemetery dirt as I looked around desperately for anything I could use to save myself, and my hand closed upon that heavy piece of headstone. It took all my self-control to keep a grip on that anchor, as I slowly dragged myself away from the edge of my lonely grave. Flowing around me, the very air itself willed me inside, but I struggled to my feet. The image of Evan's family suddenly came into my mind, and I vowed to myself that they would not be the last human contact I ever had.

I looked towards the chapel, and saw with a start that the door was now open, the heavy chain discarded on steps in front. I ran to it as quickly as I could, crying out for help, but when I reached the threshold I stopped, and could only stare in horror. Through that door, where the inside of the chapel should be, was a field. It was

bathed in sickly moonlight, and the fog rolled close to the ground. It seemed to stretch for miles, and I knew that I could wander there for years, and never meet another. I turned away from that door, but as I looked behind me I could have wept – beyond the graveyard's edge lay that same field. Stretching off into the distance.

I had to make a choice, and so I began to run from that chapel, into the field behind me. I nearly fell into a hungry grave but kept my balance well enough to get beyond them. The fog seemed to be getting thicker, and moving through it was getting harder. It was like I was running against the wind, except the air was completely still. I could hardly breathe as I inhaled it.

And then, as I found myself in the middle of that open, desolate field, I heard something. It was the strangest thing, but as I tried to run I could have sworn I heard Evan's voice call to me. He said, "Turn left". That's it. That's all he said. I know it sounds ridiculous, but that's what he told me to do. And I did it. I turned sharply to the left and kept on running. And then… nothing.

ARCHIVIST

That's when the car hit you?

NAOMI

Yes. I remember a second of headlights and then nothing until I woke up in the hospital.

ARCHIVIST

I see.

NAOMI

So what do you think? Was it real?

ARCHIVIST

Well, we'll need to do some investigation into a few of the details that you raised, but at first impressions I'd say it was only real insofar as trauma can have a very real effect on the mind. Beyond that, it's difficult to prove either way, but I would suggest you leave the stone with us, so we can study it. And it would likely help you move past this unpleasant incident. Some time with a more… qualified care professional might also prove helpful.

NAOMI

Right. I don't know what I expected, really.

ARCHIVIST

We'll let you know if we find anything.

NAOMI

Oh, this is ridiculous! I can't believe I've wasted my time-

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Following Ms. Herne's statement, we did as much follow-up as we were able, which admittedly wasn't a lot. Evan Lukas did indeed pass away from heart failure on March the 22nd, 2015, and his body was taken by his family for burial. All requests to the Lukas family for information or interviews have been very firmly rebuffed.

At roughly one in the morning on the 31st of March, Ms. Herne was involved in a collision with one Michael Getty. She had apparently run out into the road in front of Mr. Getty's car near Wormshill in the Kent Downs. She was quickly taken to a hospital and treated for concussion and dehydration. Her car was found abandoned in a field five miles away.

There are no cemeteries matching Ms. Herne's description anywhere near the road she was found, nor could there have been any fog, given the incredibly high winds during the storm that night. I'd be tempted to chalk this one up to a hallucination from stress and trauma, if it wasn't for the fact that when she was hit, Ms. Herne was found to be holding a piece of masonry. It appears to be a lump of carved granite with an engraved cross design. The size and style match what would conceivably be found atop a headstone, though we have been unable to trace its origin. Still attached to it is a small fragment of what we can assume would

have been the marker itself. The only text that can be made out simply reads “forgotten”. I’ve arranged for it to be transferred to the Institute’s Artefact Storage.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG014 – Piecemeal

Statement #0112905

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Lee Rentoul, on the murder of his associate Paul Noriega. Original statement given May 29th, 2011. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Let's get one thing straight right off – this is not a goddamn confession, alright? If you go to the police with this, I will deny every word, and I know enough about the law to know that even if I spill my guts to you about all the horrible things I've done, it will count for nothing in court. It's not like you'll even be able to help me, I just… My mate Hester said he came to you a few years back, been seeing ghosts and that, and you guys looked into it and told him it was some sort of noise messing with his head, 'infasound' or something, and he's fine now. I need that. I need you to tell me that it's just coincidence and my mind's playing tricks, and I need to not lose any more bits of me.

So yeah, I killed that asshole Noriega. Stabbed him in the throat and left him to bleed out on the dockside. Maybe that shocks you a bit, maybe not, but trust me when I say he had it coming. Eight years we worked together, and it was him that got carried away kicking McMullen's head in and moved it from assault to GBH, but sure enough, when we get picked up he turns on me and I get pinned for it. Five years I served because of him, while he walked free as you please. I'd say that I was due a bit of payback, and I certainly got it.

It wasn't my first choice, though. I'm not stupid, and parole keeps you on a short enough chain that slitting Noriega's throat was not my top priority. Don't get me wrong, it was something I'd been itching to do for five goddamn years, but I wasn't in a rush. I had plenty of time to arrange something nasty for him, and I wanted him hurt more than I felt I had to do the deed myself. So when I got out in June last year, I bided my time and kept my ear to the ground. Tried to get in touch with him, but was told by the few friends we had in common that he wasn't interested in talking to me. He'd clearly done okay for himself in the years I'd been away, and could afford some muscle to make sure that I didn't bother him. I ended up with a couple of bruised ribs when I finally got tired of the run-around and tried to have it out with him properly. It was laying there, some grim side street in Lewisham of all places that I came to the decision that if I was going to hurt this asshole, and I mean properly hurt him, I was going to have to think outside the box a bit.

I decided to pay McMullen a visit. Before Noriega had gone to work on him, Toby McMullen was just some street punk. These days he was just a street punk who had trouble turning his neck. I've met plenty of born losers in my time, I mean it's kind of a given in this business, but I've never met someone so intent on being a screw-up as McMullen. When I saw him, he was high as a kite and barely knew I was there, but you bet his eyes lit up when I mentioned Paul Noriega.

It took hours to get anything useful out of that waste of skin, but eventually I pieced together his side of this sorry tale. Noriega had paid him a visit in the hospital, apparently, before the police had picked us up, and promised that if he fingered me for the assault, then he'd have all of the narcotics his little junkie heart could dream of. Only once he was out of hospital and my conviction had gone through, it wasn't two days before McMullen was out on his arse again, and Noriega didn't want to know. Any idiot could have seen it would play out that way, but not poor, stupid Toby. Still, he'd been itching to get the knife in for almost as long as I had, and he had had the freedom to plan it, so I asked him if he had anything I could use.

I shouldn't have been surprised when he suggested magic. Toby had always been into all of that mystical crap, even before the drugs, and if there was some half-baked New Age fad going round you could bet you'd find it dribbling out of his mouth whenever he was coherent enough to actually talk. I punched him in the gut and turned to leave. He followed me, doubled over and struggling for

breath, begging me to help him. He said he was serious, said it wasn't like the other stuff, said he knew someone with real power, who could put the hurt on Noriega, but he just didn't have the money.

I should have kept walking. I should have shaken him off. I should have beat him so bad he couldn't turn his neck the other way either. But I didn't. I stopped and I listened to what that piece of human garbage had to say. I was an idiot.

So Toby took me to see his friend Angela. He never gave me her second name. I asked him what it was: Wicca, voodoo, some crystal bull? But Toby said no, nothing like that. Said he didn't really know how it was supposed to work, but had a girl a few months back, had told him about Angela; said she'd used her services on a particularly unpleasant ex-boyfriend. Apparently he'd disappeared, and they never found a body. So then I'm thinking maybe there's no magic there, just a killer with a schtick, but hey, if that was the case it was fine by me, just as long as Noriega got done.

When I finally met Angela, it was all I could do not to cave McMullen's head in. I'd just about convinced myself I was going to be meeting with a hardened killer, maybe one that kept a bunch of spooky Halloween crap around, but still someone who'd get the job done. I wasn't even put off when we pulled up to a well-kept suburban house in Bexley. But when the door was answered by an old lady in a lilac dressing gown, I almost lost it. McMullen asked if she was Angela, speaking in a quiet voice like he was actually scared of the geriatric fool. The old woman said yes, she was

Angela, and asked us to come in.

The house felt almost as old as its owner – faded floral print wallpaper, dark oak furniture and threadbare carpets. The walls were covered with framed portraits, the sort you'd get in any cheap antique store or charity shop, although as we went into the living room I noticed something that I didn't expect: they weren't paintings, they were jigsaw puzzles, each completed and framed. And sure enough, when we sat down on the worn cloth sofa, there in front of Angela was another jigsaw, half-finished. I've got no problem with the elderly, and if they want to throw away their last years putting together a damn picture, then I'm sure not going to stop them, but it wasn't exactly going to kill Noriega, was it?

I was so angry at this massive waste of my time, that when she offered us a cup of coffee, I almost put McMullen face-first through the glass table in front of us. I grunted something which Angela apparently took as a "yes please", and so a few minutes later there I was drinking instant coffee from a chipped mug that this doddering old ass clearly hadn't thought to wipe the dust off of. When she asked if I wanted Paul Noriega dead, I nearly choked.

She asked it very matter-of-factly, like it was a question on some form she knew the answer to but had to fill it in anyway. I glanced at Toby, who nodded at me, and I thought what the hell, I might as well play along. So I said yes. Yes, I did want him dead. And more than that, I wanted him to suffer. Angela smiled when I said that, a warm smile that suited her round face, and said that that wouldn't be a problem.

I started to explain the situation, but she waved it away and told me that Toby had filled her in on all the details, and that there was just one thing she needed from me, that he couldn't provide. I started to tell her that I wasn't paying for someone's gran to take out a hard case like Noriega, but she said no, she wasn't after money. She said that she was "well-compensated" for the service she provided, and that all she needed from me was an object, anything that I had taken from Noriega.

Not a gift, she said, staring into my eyes with a look that I recognised from years of working with very unpleasant people. It wouldn't work if it was a gift.

At this point I was starting to feel uneasy. Not scared, alright, I wasn't scared of this old woman, but being around her was… bad. I don't know how else to say it, she was bad. You've got to understand, I know dangerous, I understand dangerous, hell, I am dangerous. This was something else. But I wanted Paul Noriega dead so badly.

Five years ago, just before we'd been picked up by the police I'd borrowed his lighter. It was a battered old Zippo, used to have a picture of a topless woman on it, but now that was almost worn away. After he turned on me in questioning, I didn't feel much like returning it to the treacherous backstabber, so I held on to it. I hadn't thought much of it, but here it was, still in the pocket of my jacket, all those years later. I handed it to Angela, and she gave me that look again, and told me that it would work just fine.

And then we left. Angela told us not to worry about it, that Paul Noriega wasn't going to be bothering us for much longer; we just had to wait until she was finished. Finished with what exactly, she didn't say, she didn't need to. We knew whatever it was we were probably better off not knowing.

The waiting came hard, though. After he'd had me roughed up, it seemed like Noriega had decided I wasn't worth worrying about. I'd see him walking those streets like he owned them, his pair of leg-breakers in tow, and I knew there was nothing that I could do about it. He knew it, too. So I waited. And I waited. I waited for the shot, or the knife, or the poison or the… whatever would end him for good. It never came. Days turned into weeks and there he still was, as cocksure as ever.

I was patient. God, I was patient, but after three weeks I had almost written off that useless old bag as a time-wasting con job. I was going to give her one more week, just one, but then something came up that I couldn't ignore. Word came down that Noriega was meeting someone at the docks, some fence by the name of Salesa. The man dealt mainly in stolen art and curios, valuable stuff, and was paranoid as hell, which meant Noriega was going to be there alone. It might have been a trap, sure, but I'd been sitting on my ass waiting for him to magically drop dead for so long that if there was even a chance it was on the level, I had to take it.

Turns out it was true, and went off smoother than I could have hoped for. I found the warehouse a few hours before the meet, and staked out a good spot. Then I waited. Salesa turned up first, a big

Samoan guy with close-cropped hair, flanked by four men in dark suits, who carried a square wooden crate between them. They went into the warehouse, and sure enough five minutes later there he is, that snake. He was alone, and seemed to be limping slightly. He headed inside through the same door, leaving it unlocked. Perfect. There was no point me going in yet. I wasn't keen to get my head kicked in by Salesa's goons, so I just watched, my hand gripping the hilt of the combat knife I'd bought at an army surplus store I know is happy to sell off-the-books.

It was almost an hour later that Salesa and his men left, still carrying that box. They didn't look happy, but I could have given a damn. As soon as they were round the corner I headed inside, as quietly as I could, and there he was, leaning up against a pile of bricks, smoking. I started to move towards him, but as I got near he must have heard me, and turned around. He started to say something about reconsidering, and lowering the price, when he realised I was not Salesa. Then a look passed over the face of Paul Noriega that I will treasure forever. No matter what happens to me, the memory of that look of panicked terror will stay with me.

He turned to run, but whatever was wrong with his leg meant he tripped over the bricks instead. I grabbed him by the collar, my knife already out, and dragged him up. I had always been the stronger of the two of us, and he knew he couldn't fight me. Holding up his hand, he begged me to wait, to listen. I noticed that his hand was missing a couple of fingers, old wounds that had long healed over, though I didn't remember seeing them before. It didn't

matter; I could hear the blood pumping in my head and nothing was going to stop me taking my revenge. He begged for mercy, as I plunged the knife into him once, twice, three times. Again and again and again I stabbed that backstabber until, finally, I let him fall. He landed on the floor hard, dead weight, his head making a thick, cracking sound as it hit the bricks, and blood began to pool on the floor around his body.

As the rage started to fade and my breathing returned to normal, I took a second to look over poor dead Paul Noriega, and saw something seemed to have been knocked loose when his head hit the bricks. Picking it up, I saw it was a glass eye. I looked back at the corpse, and sure enough there was a gaping hole where his left eye should have been. When had that happened? He certainly had both eyes when we had worked together and all ten fingers as well. He'd also had all his teeth, where now I saw gaps all over that dead, smiling face. I shivered, though I don't know why.

I won't go into detail about how I went about disposing of the body. Just trust me when I say that even if the cops did find any piece of Noriega's corpse, they wouldn't be able to pin it on me. And life went on. His boys did come looking for me when their boss didn't return, but I knew to lay low for a while, and soon enough they realised that if he was gone, they weren't getting paid either way and moved on. And so I had my revenge, and that should have been the end of the story. But it wasn't.

It was five days after I killed Noriega that I found the first package. I was on Tottenham Marshes, near the reservoir, on business you

don't need to know, and I came to a metal bridge over one of the streams there. Now, this wasn't a place I went often, and I don't think I'd ever crossed that bridge before in my life, but there, lying in the centre of it, was a small box. It was wrapped in brown paper and string, like an old-fashioned Christmas present, and had my name printed on it in clear letters: LEE RENTOUL, FOR IMMEDIATE CONSIDERATION.

Obviously, I was a little bit freaked out at this, but not as freaked out as when I opened it. Inside, lying was a black cardboard box, full of cotton wool and a single severed finger. It was obviously some sort of threat; some punk reckoned they could put a scare on me. No chance. I threw the finger into one of the canals and set the box on fire before throwing it in a bin. I headed home quickly, keeping my attention all around me and my hand on my knife. I was so busy looking behind me, I didn't see the hole in front of me, and I tripped. As I fell forward, I felt a hot pain in the hand that had been on my knife. You guessed it. Falling had caused the blade to slice clean through my little finger.

I'm not too proud to admit that I screamed at this. I tore up my shirt, trying to make a bandage to stop the bleeding, at least until I could get to a hospital. But as I began to wrap it up, I noticed that it wasn't actually bleeding. The wound was closed. It had healed, like it had happened years ago. I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what to do. So I just went home. I wasn't getting my finger back, so I figured I could try to deal with it after a decent night's sleep.

There was another box at my flat. Same as before. This one contained two toes. I tried to ignore it and keep my foot well away from any knives, but… I was trying to adjust the settings on my flatscreen when it fell off the wall. Hit my right foot and, well, have you figured it out yet? That was two weeks ago. Since then, I lost four more fingers to accidents, most of my toes, this eye I managed to put out on a goddamn fencepost. I've lost count of the number of teeth gone, and believe me when I say that you don't want to know how I lost the hand. Each time, a box wrapped in brown paper: LEE RENTOUL, FOR IMMEDIATE CONSIDERATION.

I've tried everything. Once I thought I managed to outsmart it. Spent the day in my bedroom – nothing sharp, no edges. I'd taken out everything except the mattress. It didn't matter, I woke the next morning with an agony in my foot far sharper than any knife could cut, and the big toe missing, just like the one I'd received the morning before.

I knew it was Angela. Of course I did, I'm not thick. Whatever curse she'd laid on Noriega must have passed to me. I went over there, you know. Went to confront that old… and you know what happened? She let me in. She was nice, civil. Offered me another cup of coffee! I told her where to stick it. Demanded, asked, begged her to stop whatever was happening to me. You know what she did? She shrugged. She just shrugged! Told me that "Some hungers are too strong to be denied", whatever the hell that means. So I went for her. I was going to strangle the life out of that curse-flinging bag of bones. But as I reached for her, I… I don't know. I

don’t know what happened. I know that that’s how I lost the hand. I know I chewed it off.

Look, it doesn’t matter. I just need your help. I need this to stop. I don’t know how, but this is your area, right? This is what you do. You look into this weird ghost crap, right? Well this is the definition of weird ghost crap, and I need you to help me. I need you to save me from whatever is happening.

I don’t have much time. I got a box this morning, a few hours before I came here. It was a tongue.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

It doesn’t look like this case was ever properly followed up. According to the supplementary notes, shortly after making his statement, Mr. Rentoul became violent towards Institute staff and in the ensuing incident there was… an accident. No details are given, but it apparently required Mr. Rentoul’s hospitalisation. I’m reminded of a somewhat tasteless joke about loose tongues. He did not return to the Institute afterwards, and his statement was archived.

According to the arrest records Sasha uncovered, Mr. Rentoul was telling the truth about the somewhat chequered past of himself and his associate Paul Noriega, with extensive files on both of them. The last listed interaction between the police and Mr. Noriega is two months before Mr. Rentoul’s statement, and since then no sign can

be found of him in police records, or indeed anywhere else.

I sent Martin to look into this ‘Angela’ character – not that I want him to get chopped up, of course, but someone had to. Apparently, he spent three days looking into every woman named Angela in Bexley over the age of 50. He could not find anyone that matches the admittedly vague description given here, though he informs me that he had some very pleasant chats about jigsaws. Useless ass.

Tim has done his best to try and hunt down Mr. Rentoul and see if we can contact him for a follow-up interview or evaluation, but it looks like he disappeared shortly after making this statement. We were able to find his old landlord, though, who said that Mr. Rentoul vanished in early April of 2011, leaving many unpaid bills and no forwarding address. He said that when he had gone to clear out the flat, he had been surprised to find that there was no furniture left. All that remained in the house, he said, were hundreds and hundreds of small cardboard boxes.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG015 – Lost Johns' Cave

Statement #0140911

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Laura Popham, regarding her experience exploring the Three Counties System of caves with her sister Alena Sanderson. Original statement given November the 9th, 2014. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Caving has always been one of my hobbies. My main hobby really – all the equipment can get quite costly after a while, and I don't earn enough to have more than one expensive activity like that in my life. Alena, my sister, came along with me on a trip a few years back. She'd lost her job and her house in quick succession, and was staying with me. I thought it would cheer her up. It did, and we've been doing it ever since. Stupid idea, really. I wish I'd left her crying on the sofa. At least then she'd still be alive.

We didn't really have the money to actually go potholing all that often, so I spent a lot of time reading and planning and just looking

at stuff online. We averaged maybe a cave a year. Alena was never quite as into it as I was, though. Don't get me wrong, she was no claustrophobe and I wasn't forcing her to follow me into the darkness on threat of a family rift, but she mainly enjoyed the climbing, and I always ended up going a little bit deeper than she wanted.

I think, to be honest, she would have preferred to get her exercise under the open sky or, failing that, in an above-ground gym. Maybe we should have tried cliffs or a climbing wall, but caving was our thing. It had helped her when she was in a bad place, and she knew how much I loved it. She also wasn't too keen on the scrapes and bruises you always get on expeditions. She used to joke that it felt like the earth itself was trying to kick her ass. If only she had known. We did have fun, though, and she always chose to come along. I never forced her to be there. I never did that.

We'd done some of the Three Counties cave system before – a short trip of only a couple of hours into the Rift Pot caves. The whole system is huge, though – I mean, there's a reason it's called the Three Counties System – so there was plenty more to explore, and we'd had so much fun the first time that I wanted to try it from a different angle. We were going to go in through the Death's Head Hole, then travelling through Lost John's Cave as far as Gavel Pot before heading back. The prospect of this excited me, as in order to travel between Lost John's Cave and the Gavel Pot system we were going to have to do some cave diving. I had never done cave diving before, and neither had Alena, although she told me that the

prospect spooked her less than some of the squeezes we'd had to do to get there.

We made all the arrangements, got our permits in order with the CNCC and had my husband Alistair note down all the details in case anything went wrong. You never go caving unless someone knows where you're headed and what your plan is. I had also done as much research into our route as possible, as I had no intention of straying from the well-explored, thoroughly-charted caves. I was never much of a pioneer, if I'm being honest, and I was happy to stay to the main routes. No, what I used to love about caving was the feeling of being deep inside the earth; the cold, solid walls folding in around me. It always used to feel like they were keeping me safe, though it doesn't feel like that anymore.

It was Saturday, June 14th we went. I had taken the Friday before off work to prepare, and was planning to spend Sunday nursing well-earned bruises. Alena and I drove up to Lancashire, towards Death's Head Hole. I live in Manchester so it wasn't too long a trip. We parked up at Leck Fell, the closest you could legally park. I was surprised to see that we were the only ones there when we arrived. It was a sunny day in late spring and the weather was meant to be clear for days, with no chance of rain making the caves too dangerous. It was a perfect day for caving but it seemed we were the only ones taking advantage of it.

Death's Head Hole is not nearly as impressive or intimidating as its name suggests. If you didn't know what you were looking for, you might end up missing it entirely. When we went, much of it was

covered in wild plants and bracken. It was barely larger than we were, and I remember at the time the phrase “a perfect fit” came into my head unbidden. Still, the resin anchors were in good condition, and we hooked up and descended our ropes without incident, despite a few unexpected twists in the pothole.

It was a bright day; it was almost noon when we went down, so the light filtered a lot further in than I would have expected. It was some time before we had to turn on our headlamps, but eventually we did so. By the time we hit the bottom, there was none of that sunshine left to be seen and the silent darkness of the cave swallowed us. Beneath our feet, the gentle waters of the underground stream ran their course, as they had for thousands of years, undisturbed by the rough tread of humanity, and we followed them. It was a much gentler descent than that which we had come in with, but it was very slippery, and I was glad I had invested in a waterproof map case, although it made it slightly harder to read at times.

Alena stood back to let me have my ritual. There was something I always did when I first entered a cave, and that was to take a moment to turn off all the lights, and place both my hands upon the cold, earthen walls. I remember once, when I was a child, we went on a school trip to White Scar Cave up in Yorkshire. It was a lovely, safe, accessible cave and was absolutely beautiful, which I suppose is why it was popular for such trips. After we’d been down there for a few minutes, the guide led us much deeper, and told us to stand very quietly. She turned off the lights, to show us children what

true darkness is like. I'd never seen anything like it. It was such a pure black, so encompassing, and in the warmth of the underground I found myself full of a joy I've never forgotten. Even among a class of thirty schoolchildren, I felt like the only presence that mattered was the cave.

Ever since then, I would always take a moment on any potholing trip to do the same, and feel again that utter darkness, with no sound but the gently flowing river and my own breathing. I don't think it's an uncommon practice, actually, but I rarely went caving with anyone other than Alena, and, while she indulged me, I don't think she really got anything out of it.

We turned our lights back on, and began to head deeper into the cave. I had a map, which we began to follow as closely as we could. I'm quite experienced in these things, but even I find it hard sometimes to match the irregular lines and angles of the underground passages to the often abstract shapes written into the map. There were several junctions that were significantly smaller than the map would seem to show, and the point of entry into Lost John's Cave was what we would call a squeeze. It wasn't on the map, but it seemed to be the only way through.

Now, most passages you find yourself travelling through when caving are much smaller than would normally be comfortable for people to move through. After all, they were eroded by often tiny streams of water and minor tectonic events, so accommodating humans was never high on their list of priorities.

A squeeze is something different, though. A squeeze can be a hole less than a foot wide, sometimes going on for a long way, the rock pressing in on all sides of you, and your helmet banging whenever you try to turn your head. In a particularly bad squeeze, there are parts where the walls and ceiling are so close that you can't move your arms or bend your legs to push forward, and you just have to squirm your way to the other side like a worm. This was a particularly bad squeeze. Near the end, it got so bad that, if Alena hadn't gone in first, I would have told her to go back and forget Lost John's Cave.

About half way through, I realised that it was far tighter than I had imagined. I called ahead, to make sure Alena had made it out okay. She called back, told me it was a hard one, but she was fine. I wanted to answer her, but by that point the rock was so close around me it was stopping me from doing anything but holding my breath and willing myself forward.

A hand grasped me firmly on the shoulder and pulled me through. Just like that, I was out. Alena gave me a smirk, as if to comment on the fact that she had made it through unassisted, and I, the true cave aficionado, had needed a hand. I wanted to shoot back some pointed comment about her being more slender than me, but by the time I had got my breathing under control again, the anger had died down and I managed a weak smile.

We made our way through the cave until we came to the Cathedral. It's a large, arching cave – quite breathtaking, though it requires a couple of sheer drops to access, one of about 40 feet. We had

experience and equipment enough to make quite light work of it, though, and soon we were beneath the Cathedral, in what is imaginatively called the Crypt. We stopped here for a rest and a bite to eat, and Alena told me an interesting thing about Lost John's Cave. While I had been concerned with finding maps and as much information as I could on getting through, she told me she had been looking into a history of the place.

She said everyone puts the apostrophe in the wrong place, when talking about Lost John's Cave. As the stories go, it was two men, both named John, who were the first to delve deep into the cave. They went too far, though, and their candles had gone out. They lost their way together in the sprawling labyrinth of tunnels, and never emerged. Alena said she thought it was quite sweet, in a strange sort of way, and joked that if she ever got trapped underground, she'd want it to be with me.

I smiled and nodded, though secretly, the thought appalled me. It wasn't at the thought of being entombed down there – at the time, it didn't seem like such an awful fate – but the thought of having to spend my last days with Alena was a bit too much. I'm sorry, that's a horrible thing to say about the dead. I loved my sister, and I loved spending time with her, but to be lost beneath the earth is such an intensely private thing. Maybe she realised that, at the end.

After our brief stop we made our way down through the Dome. It was beautiful, and this was the part that I had been dreading, as all the experienced cavers I had talked to had said that this was the hardest descent. It went easily. Very easily, actually, and at the time

I remember getting a weird feeling, like I was being swallowed. Finally, we made it through the shale cavern and into the master cave. As we stood there, I felt anticipation and trepidation in equal measure. Before us lay the passage, filled with the still water of the sump. We were about to have our first cave dive.

I had always been told by experienced cave divers that you never judge the distance correctly. The first few times you try to surface, you will always hit your head on the stone above, so it's best to try and not be too alarmed by it. I reminded Alena of this as we got our equipment ready, and she told me she remembered, and then surprised me by asking to be the first one to go through, saying something or other about conquering fears. I said yes, why not, and let her go through.

As I stood there alone, waiting, I began to feel something I had never before felt this far underground. I began to feel uneasy. It was as silent as it had ever been, but there was something else there, beneath the silence. Almost like a whisper.

I shook the feeling off when it came time to follow Alena, and dived into the pool. It wasn't far to the junction which would lead us on to the Gavel Pot. I pressed myself through the narrow space, half swimming, half climbing, until I thought I had gone far enough, and attempted to surface. Clunk. My helmet hit lightly against the roof of the tunnel. Fine, that was as expected. I kept swimming another few meters and tried again. Clunk.

That gave me a nasty shock, as I should have been well past the end

of this first tunnel. I kept going, until I reached the end of the subterranean waterway, and went towards the surface. Clunk. I started to panic. Was this a dead end? There was no further I could go. Where was Alena? She couldn't have come back past me; the tunnel was far too narrow. In desperation I tried to come up one more time.

I broke the surface to see Alena laughing to herself, and holding a rock over the part of the water where I had been trying to emerge. I swore at her violently, not sure whether to hit her or join in her laughing. She apologised, but said she had seen the rock and couldn't resist, as I was always going on about the helmet banging on the roof. I sat there, suddenly drained. The adrenaline of my panic seemed to have sapped much of my energy, and I think my sister could see that, as she didn't press me to go on. We both knew that the passage through from this junction to the Gavel Pot itself was a much longer dive, and neither of us was really up to it. We just sat there for a while in silence.

It had taken longer to get this far than we had planned, so I suggested going back the way we came, rather than continuing to go deeper into the cave. Alena agreed but, as I turned away, she asked me how lost I was in a low, grating voice. I snapped back that we weren't lost at all, that I'd followed the map exactly, and she just gave me this look, like she didn't understand what I was talking about. I shrugged, and told her that I would go first on the way back, and she agreed. I was eager to get back and be above ground in a way that I had never been before. I got my equipment ready

and dived back into the water, heading back towards Death's Head Hole.

That's when everything started to go really, really wrong.

To begin with, the water didn't end. I tried to surface, as I had on my first time through, and again there was that clunk as my helmet hit the roof of the tunnel. I moved on and tried again, but still no luck. I began to fight down the rising alarm, told myself that the tunnel had a definite end and I just had to reach it, but it just kept going. No light, no surface, nothing but this cramped waterway, pressing on every side waiting to claim me. I don't know how long I was desperately swimming forward, but I almost screamed with relief when I reached my hand and felt it break the surface of the water.

It wasn't the cave I expected. What stretched before me was a tunnel even smaller than the waterlogged one I had left. I scrambled forward into it, not because I wanted to go on into that unknown passage, but because I was worried about Alena being able to get out of the water behind me. I must have taken a wrong turn, except that didn't make sense. I hadn't turned at all, and more than that, there weren't any turns or junctions in this part of the cave. I had checked all the maps of this area over and over, and they all put it as a straight line. I waited, wanting to talk to my sister when she surfaced, and discuss where to go from here. She didn't emerge. I don't know how long I lay there; it was too cramped to check the time, but it felt like hours. I wanted to go back and check, but I couldn't even turn around to see. I just waited

for a splash that never came.

I decided to go on, press forward until I at least found somewhere wide enough that I could turn. As crawled on, I scraped against the jagged rocks until I felt them pressing into my bare skin where my clothes had ripped. I can deal with it when I'm out, I kept thinking, but the passage just got smaller and smaller, until at last I couldn't move any further. I finally accepted that I was going to have to try and squeeze back the way I had come without even turning round. I started to shuffle backwards, and my feet touched against solid rock. The tunnel was gone. It was then that I screamed. And my light went out.

I said earlier that I enjoyed the pure dark of the cave. I was wrong. I had never truly known a darkness like this. Unable to move, barely with breathing space enough to cry for help. Even as I lay there it felt as though the walls pressed me further, and I knew that the stone I had always believed to be my friend and protector was going to entomb me here.

In the distance, I saw the faintest point of light. It looked like a candle flame, far down the tunnel, so weak that it lit nothing but itself. It grew closer, but any hope it might have given me quickly died as it grew. It was coming towards me so slowly, and deep down I knew that it was… of this place. It meant me harm.

As it got closer, I saw the pale hand that held it, and I heard something. It was Alena. It sounded far off and muffled, but I was sure she was calling for help. I shut my eyes, for all the good it did

in that place, and tried desperately to will it all away. When I opened my eyes again, the light was still there, but it had changed somehow. It seemed brighter and, as I looked, I realised it was no longer coming from a candle. I could hardly believe it, but it looked like daylight.

With every last ounce of strength I possessed, I pushed myself forward. Had I been climbing this whole time? My clothes were ragged and torn, my skin scraped and bloody, but after nearly an hour I broke onto the surface through a small opening not on any of the maps. I breathed in fresh, cool air, and I screamed as long and loud as I could. That was how Alistair and the cave rescue team found me. Apparently I'd been underground for almost twenty-four hours, and he had called in the cave rescue service.

I was well cared for, as I waited for news of Alena. My wounds were treated and I was given food and water. It took another day before the rescue team told me what I think I already knew: there was no sign of her anywhere. I never saw her again, and she was added to the list of fatalities, so I suppose that's an end of it. I haven't been underground since, and I don't intend to.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

This is a strange one. I have rarely come across a statement written with such conviction, yet where so many of the details are provably false. The CNCC have no record of Ms. Popham getting a permit for

this expedition, and the number of other permits they issued for June 14th would indicate that they certainly weren't the only ones in the cave that day. Beyond that, Death's Head Hole and Lost John's Cave are, as Ms. Popham pointed out, well-documented in layout, and according to Sasha's reckoning, the route she described is borderline nonsensical.

What is true is that on 15th of June, the Yorkshire Dales Cave Rescue Organisation was contacted by Mr. Alistair Popham, who told them his wife and sister-in-law had gone caving the day before, and had not returned. I sent Tim to check the details – Martin declined to help with this investigation as he's "a bit claustrophobic" – and he found some more bizarre discrepancies.

Ms. Popham was not found aboveground, as she claimed. She was found a few yards from the bottom of Death's Head Hole, unresponsive and kneeling next to a small pile of burned out candles. Alistair Popham claims not to have seen any such things being packed. She only came out of this stupor when brought above ground, at which point she started shouting about her sister Alena, demanding they go and "save her".

There is also the matter of the recording. She does not mention it in her statement at all, but Ms. Popham took a camera with her into the cave system. It was never claimed back from the CRO after her rescue, and Tim managed to gain enough access to copy the footage. Best not to ask how, I think.

Most of it is mundane footage of Ms. Popham and her sister cave

climbing, which seemed to match her statement, but the last recording is… somewhat alarming. The timestamp puts it at just past two o'clock in the morning of June 15th. It is completely black, though whether this is because it was in a pitch dark cave or simply because the lens cap was still on is unclear. The audio is what concerns me, and here I will play a sample:

[CLICK]

[Sound of underground watery movement and the increasingly panicked voice of Laura Popham saying "Take her, not me."]

[CLICK]

The video is 2 hours and 43 minutes long, and the audio remains consistent throughout.

No sign of Alena Sanderson has been found in the two years since her disappearance, and I have made the decision not to follow up our findings with Ms. Popham.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG016 – Arachnophobia

Statement #0150409

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Carlos Vittery, regarding his arachnophobia and its manifestations. Original statement given April 9th, 2015. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I hate spiders. I know, I know, everyone hates spiders. Any time there's any list of the top however many fears, they're always up there, and whole horror franchises have been built on the basic premise that people hate spiders. But not like me. Not like this. It's not the sight of a spider that gets me, not the legs or the eyes or even the webs they leave behind with only the drained corpse of their insect victims still inside. It's the presence of a spider. The knowledge of its being, somewhere near, waiting to crawl on you, and all the warning you get that gentle tickle of its legs as it climbs upon you.

I'm not explaining myself very well. Let me try and phrase it in a different way: I can watch any number of films about the things. Documentary or horror, it doesn't matter. I can read books on them. I can stare at close-up pictures of their weird spider faces all day long, and there's hardly a shudder from me. But I had to move from my last house after discovering how many spiders made a home in my garden. I walked out there one day with the intention of smoking a cigarette, sat on the rusty garden furniture that had come with the place, and looked up.

There it was – stretched between two large branches, silhouetted against the sky it sat. Objectively speaking, the thing was tiny, couldn't have been more than half an inch leg-to-leg, but up there, suspended high above me, its body black against the slate grey sky, it filled me with a sickening dread. I leapt up, and started to head back inside, but as I did, my eyes flicked wildly around the rest of the garden, and everywhere they came to rest, I saw more lurking spiders, more webs. There were dozens that I could see, which meant there must be hundreds more I could not.

There was no way I could live there after that. How could I sleep, knowing how many crawling horrors moved and twitched and spun their filth just a wall away? I'm not a fool; I know that all gardens contain spiders. Every single one is filled with them, nestled in any crevice or hiding spot they can find. But now I knew. I had seen them in their spindly multitudes, and I could not unknow how many were there. And I could not stop thinking of when winter would come, and they would seek to find a way into the warmth of

my home. So I had to move.

Renting in London moves very quickly, which is a pain if you're looking to find exactly the right place to live, but if you just need to get out and into a place as far away from a garden as possible and you aren't choosy, it can be sorted out very fast indeed. I found a place in Boothby Road in Archway. While nearby Elthorne Road was full of houses and gardens – no doubt infested with spiders – my building was surrounded by concrete driveways and parking spaces, and the only vegetation were a few window boxes the other residents kept. The place was old, but had been kept clean enough that I didn't need to worry about hidden webs, and the rooms, though small, were open enough that I could keep an eye on all corners. I was on the second floor, so any eight-legged intruder would have something of a climb to access it; although I was acutely aware of the distance a spider can shoot its web when it wants to get somewhere.

The building was also quite happy with pets, so I got a cat. I had heard from a friend who had a pair of them that they have a habit of catching spiders and eating them – slowly and torturously. This sounded good to me, so I invested in an older tabby, from a local shelter called Major Tom.

This is all a lot of superfluous information, I know, but you have to understand the lengths I went to; how little I would tolerate a spider to live in my presence, to fully grasp how unnatural it was, what happened to me. What still is happening to me.

I saw a spider about three months ago. Not unusual. Certainly not as unusual as I would like – even with all my precautions they still manage to get into my home once a month or so. My normal course of action is to immediately flee the room and leave Major Tom inside to deal with it, returning after a few hours. In all previous cases this had worked fine – I believe Major Tom definitely ate the majority of them, and those spiders that had simply fled back into the shadows, well, I can trick myself into believing they also suffered such a fate. It may be that my grey feline companion never actually ate any of them, but he was a fine enough placebo that such a thought didn't concern me as much as it might.

I remember that month there had been a few of them. Our building had acquired something of an infestation of some sort of insect I didn't recognise – small, silvery worms, almost like maggots, but slightly longer – and I assume that they provided a good meal for the eight-legged little monsters.

This spider was different. I felt it the moment I laid eyes on the thing, standing in the middle of the kitchen wall, displaying itself boldly, as though it wanted to be as visible as possible. I felt that familiar rushing fear, as though the floor had dropped away and a thousand tiny legs are crawling upon every inch of my skin. But there was something else there. I was aware of this spider in a way I had never had been of others that preceded it. It wasn't the biggest, maybe an inch wide, but its abdomen was swelled grotesquely. I could feel every one of its void-black eyes focused upon me, see each hair on its fat, bulbous body, and smell the venom I knew

dripped from its fangs. I hate spiders, as I have said, but I would have sworn that this one hated me back.

None of this was enough to make me think twice about gingerly pushing Major Tom towards the thing with my foot and fleeing the room. I made my way into the living room and closed the door behind me, leaving cat and spider to deal with each other. I sat there, watching the TV, some panel show re-run, trying not to think about the thing on my kitchen wall. An hour passed, then two, and finally I felt like I had enough stability of mind to open the door and confirm that the damned arachnid was gone.

The moment I opened the door I felt something furry brush against my leg. Choking down a sudden moment of panic, I looked and, sure enough, there was Major Tom, hurrying out of the room at a run. He didn't seem hurt or upset, so I assumed his job was done. Then I turned back to my kitchen, and froze. The spider sat in that same spot. It wasn't eaten, it hadn't fled, from what I could tell it hadn't even moved! The only way I was sure the thing was real and alive was that I swear to you I could see its mandibles twitching with anticipation. I stood there, unable to summon the will to close the kitchen door or enter into it fully and cursed Major Tom for a useless bag of fur.

It was another hour before I was finally able to move. The whole time I stood motionless in the doorway, watching the fat spider that paraded itself on my wall. Still it remained in place, and I couldn't help but feel that it was daring me to do something, to take action, to kill it. I began to move. Slowly, ever so slowly, I approached it,

reaching a hand over the table and taking the half-drunk mug of coffee, now long cold, in my hand. I gripped the handle so tight I was sure it would snap off in my fingers. Finally, I stood before the spider, preparing myself to calmly crush it against the wall. Then it moved without warning and I hurled the mug against the wall with all my might.

It hit the spider dead on and exploded in a shower of coffee and china. I stood there for a minute, breathing hard, but all that remained was a large stain on the wall and mug shards littering the floor. I should have cleaned it up immediately, but I was so tired, as though killing the spider had taken every ounce of wakefulness that I had within me. I simply turned around and went to bed. My dreams that night were many-legged but there's not much unusual in that.

I spent the next morning cleaning up the detritus from my battle with the spider. I wished that I had gotten the coffee cleaned before it had dried, but by lunchtime the place was looking very much as it had before. As I swept up the smashed mug, I noticed that the largest shard, emblazoned with the design of a stylized blue owl, had a vivid smear on it. Brown, red and green were crushed onto it where it had hit the spider. It disgusted me, but looking at it I couldn't help but feel a small surge of triumph, and I smiled as I threw it into the garbage bag. Major Tom watched, impassive as always.

The next few days passed without incident. Major Tom had never been much of an indoor cat, so I had installed a cat flap some time

before to allow him to come and go as he pleased. After that first encounter he seemed to spend more time outside, and I saw him less and less as the week progressed. I didn't think much of it; we'd had a particularly mild Christmas, so it made sense that he'd be enjoying the outside as much as possible before winter really set in.

It was the Friday after my first encounter that it happened. I came in from work, tired after a difficult week – I used to work as a data analyst at an online betting company – and decided to order takeout and relax in front of some TV. I eased myself back into my armchair and reached for the remote. I was aware that Major Tom wasn't anywhere to be seen, which was odd, since he usually got fed shortly after I arrived home, and he was never one to miss a meal.

Still, I didn't think of it, and turned on the television. I hadn't turned the satellite box, so what showed at first was an empty blue screen. I reached to the other remote to turn it on, when I realised the blue screen wasn't empty. There, sat upon it, black against the glowing background, was a spider. And not just any spider, but I swear to you, and here's where you march me out of your little institute as a time-wasting lunatic, but I swear that it was the same damn spider.

It was the same size, the same shape, the same thick, pulsing abdomen. But more than that, I felt it. I felt it in that fear that hit me like I had been punched in the stomach, and I felt it in the way that the thing just sat there, unmoving, waiting for me to kill it again. I was stuck to my chair, just watching this spider as it stood

there on the screen of my television. I called for Major Tom, but there was no response.

God knows how long I sat staring at the spider on my television. I don't wear a watch, and I couldn't move my arm to check my phone. If I hadn't been sat down I would have run already, but standing up was more movement than I could bring myself to make while it watched me.

Finally, I got to my feet. It was less effort than I expected when I finally mustered the will to do it. Although that's not really how it felt at the time – at that point it felt almost involuntary, as though some something were lifting me, hoisting me to my feet by unseen strings. I began to walk, but rather than fleeing the spider I found I moved towards it, until I stopped there, so close I could have touched it, though my mind recoils at the thought.

Before I realised exactly what I was doing, I lifted my leg, and kicked the television, instantly crushing the bulbous spider beneath the heel of my shoe, and, now I think about it, narrowly avoiding a nasty electrocution. I had had no inkling I was capable of such a thing, but once again the spider was dead, and I had a slimy stain on my shoe.

I threw the shattered remains of the television away, burned the shoe and tried, desperately, to return to something approaching my normal life, but it was no good. The spider that I had killed had come back, of that I had no doubt, and a deep paranoia began to set in as I waited for it to return again. I saw Major Tom only once in

the weeks that followed. He came in, sniffed at the bowl of food I had continued to put out for him in the vain hope of luring him back, and turned around and walked away. As he left, he gave me a look that I could have sworn was one of pity.

I called in sick to my job, as I wasn't really sleeping, and so much of the time was spent checking nooks and corners for the spider that I was a nervous wreck. More than once, I did find spiders, but they weren't the one who was after me, so I killed them without a second thought. My life descended into the mess that it, well, it still remains today.

I was right, though. Two weeks after I kicked it to death on my TV, there it was. Over my bed. Standing on the wall, over the spot where my head lay each night as I tried in vain to sleep. It was that damned spider. And I recognised it. My bedroom is better lit than the kitchen, and it wasn't silhouetted against a screen, so for the first time I got a really good look at my tormentor, and I realised that I had seen it before the kitchen.

I was not born with a fear of spiders. In fact, for the first six years of my life, I can only assume I existed in peaceful harmony with them. But that changed in the autumn of 1991. I didn't live in London then, but with my parents in Southampton, and we would visit my grandparents every Sunday, out in the nearby New Forest. They lived on the edge of a suburb, and from the bottom of my grandmother's garden you could see fields stretching away for a half a mile to the tree line. I used to spend a lot of time down there, and if you were lucky, sometimes there would be horses.

That day, there were no horses, just an overcast sky and wind that threatened to blow off my blue woollen hat. I was wandering through the scattered trees by the fence I wasn't allowed to cross, and I noticed a fallen log. I had seen it before, of course, as there was little in that place that changed much between my weekly visits, but there was something different about it. In one of the hollows sat something that I did not recognise. It was a pale brown, and looked soft and lumpy, like a small sack. Knowing no better, I approached it, and saw, perched on its top, a small spider. It watched me, warily, its fat abdomen twitching, but it did not move.

In my childish ignorance, I thought it looked silly, and I reached over for it. But I tripped. My hand hit the spider, killing it instantly, and plunging into the egg sack below, causing it to tear open and explode. I was suddenly covered in thousands of small, white crawling things, those tiny, dripping, half-formed and unfinished spiders. They covered my hands, my face… my eyes.

I can never forget that feeling, and since then, the presence of spiders has filled me with the deepest dread. And that was the spider that sat before me on my bedroom wall. Though I remembered little of what the long-dead thing had looked like, I knew it was the same. Can you be haunted by the ghost of a spider that destroyed your childhood?

It sounds absurd. It sounds laughable. But there it was. I didn't know why it was here. And I didn't know why I was reaching for it. My mind screamed to stop, and I let out a terrible cry, but my hand kept moving towards it inexorably, as though willed by something

else. This ghost spider felt real enough when I crushed it beneath my palm, legs splayed and body bursting warmly against my skin. Once I had control of my limb once again, I spent the rest of the night washing my hand.

I am moving out of that building. I officially gave Major Tom's paperwork to the family on the ground floor he decided to move in with, and will be leaving the moment I find somewhere, anywhere, available for immediate rental. I can't risk seeing the thing again. I'm also seeing doctors, trying to get a referral for psychiatric treatment or possibly some antipsychotic medication, but I felt I should probably give you a statement as well. I don't expect you to believe me, but if "ghost spiders" falls under anyone's remit, I suppose it's yours.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

I think the most important lines in this statement come at the very end. Antipsychotic medication and disbelief are, I think, exactly what Mr. Vittery needed to get through his problem with, er, "ghost spiders". There simply aren't enough details given in this statement to actually investigate, short of Martin confirming that Mr. Vittery did indeed live at the addresses he provided.

I would have asked Tim to follow up with Mr. Vittery himself, but he appears to have passed away shortly after giving his statement. He was found in his Boothby Road residence, after neighbours

complained of the smell, and had apparently been dead for over a week. Coroner's report lists asphyxiation as the cause of death, probably due to choking, though it doesn't say what he choked on, simply lists "foreign organic material" blocking his throat.

If I were of a more alarmist nature, I might think the appearance of Mr. Vittery's corpse lent some credibility to his tale. But as I told Martin earlier, he was there for over a week, so there is very likely a perfectly natural explanation for the fact that his body was completely encased in web.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG017 – The Boneturner's Tale

Statement #9991006

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Sebastian Adekoya, regarding a new acquisition at Chiswick Library. Original statement given June 10th, 1999. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Books are amazing, aren't they? I mean, when you think about what they really are. People don't give the actuality of language the weight it deserves, I feel. Words are a way of taking your thoughts, the very make-up of yourself, and giving them to another. Putting your thoughts in the mind of someone else. They are not a perfect method, of course, as there's plenty of scope for mutation and corruption between your mind and that of the listener, but that doesn't change the essence of what language is.

Spoken aloud, though, the thought dies quickly if not picked up.

Simple vibrations that vanish almost as soon as they are created, though if they find a host, then they can lodge there, proliferate, and maybe spread further. Still, it is not a reliable method in terms of a thought's endurance, as humans are fragile creatures, and rarely last a century.

A book, though, is another story. There are written texts that have outlived the civilisations that created them. Imagine, thoughts hundreds, thousands of years old, preserved and ready to be taken again. Corrupted, or translated, perhaps, by a culture that does not understand them, but still, ideas that have outlived by lifetimes the mind that first conceived them.

Will the thoughts that first ran through Shakespeare's head ever stop being thought by someone, somewhere? And a book, so dense with a mind's fossilised creations, is it any wonder they have been ascribed such power throughout the ages? Or that an old library, with heavy tomes covering every wall, seems to have such a weight to it, beyond the physical presence of the texts it holds?

I used to work at Chiswick Library. I didn't have such ideas back then, though. I just knew I loved books, always had, and so when the opportunity arose to work in my local library I jumped at the chance. I had been a voracious reader ever since I was old enough to hold a book for myself, and even before that my mother tells me I would pester her constantly to read to me. I suppose you might say my mind has always been receptive to the thoughts that lurk in the written page.

Still, Chiswick Library is a long way from the cramped and austere libraries you're probably imagining. It's light and airy, with bookshelves and carpets that speak more of cash-strapped local councils than of the rich majesty of knowledge. It has an extensive children's section and the vast majority of its stock are dog-eared paperbacks of true crime, literary fiction and reference books. It has a modest collection of books on tape and the atmosphere, though quiet, is far from oppressive. In a word, I would sum the place up as 'unthreatening'.

It was three years ago when this happened. I had already been working there for about a year when the book first turned up. Now, we used to buy all of our books new, and I never did any of the acquisitions for the library, so I couldn't say when or where it might have been bought from, but it looked old and pretty beaten up when I first noticed it. It was handed back with four other books at the front desk, and as I was scanning them through, I noticed that one of the barcodes didn't seem to match up. The barcode and ISBN both registered as being that of *Trainspotting,* by Irvine Welsh, but the book itself was an almost featureless black paperback, with a title on the front in a faded white serif font: *The Boneturner's Tale*.

I was a bit confused, and called the librarian, Ruth Weaver, over to ask about it. She didn't recall seeing it ever before, but stuck in the front was the ex-libris bookplate of Chiswick Library, as well as a lending label with a handful of stamps going back several years. Ruth shrugged and told me not to worry too much about it – we'd get it recorded and put on the system properly, but something about

the situation bothered me, so I decided to check the record of the man who had returned it.

His name, at least according to his library card, was Michael Crew, and sure enough, three weeks ago he had borrowed four books from us. Specifically, the four others he had returned. I suggested to Ruth that perhaps he was a self-published author who was trying to trick his way onto our shelves, and she laughed, saying that was probably it, although why anyone would go to the trouble of faking it just to get on the shelves of Chiswick Library was beyond her. The book even looked worn, though, like it had seen decades of being read, with a line creased down the spine, and one half of the cover faded from the sun. Nor, from what I could see, did it list any author at all.

It was at that moment that Jared Hopworth came in, and I had to put the book to one side. Jared and I had once been fast friends; growing up on the same road, attending the same schools, we had spent much of our early life as inseparable. But he had always been, well, not to put too fine a point on it, thick as mud, and when I went away to university, he stayed behind. I think he saw it as something of a betrayal, and when I finally returned, I knew immediately something had changed between us. He spent the time I was away becoming a bit of a crook, and upon my return, began what would eventually become a campaign of petty terror. He was always very careful to stop before he did anything that might get the police involved, and I guess there was enough leftover affection from a childhood spent together that I never really thought about

reporting him. It wa–

ARCHIVIST

Oh, erm, hello Elias.

ELIAS

Do you have a moment?

ARCHIVIST

Not really, I'm sort of in the middle of something.

ELIAS

I understand, it's just that Miss Herne has lodged a complaint.

ARCHIVIST

A complaint? I could just as easily complain about her wasting my time!

ELIAS

That's not how it works, Jonathan.

ARCHIVIST

I wouldn't even have had to do the recording if Rosie kept her equipment in better condition.

ELIAS

Regardless, I would prefer that you not antagonise anyone connected to the Lukas family. They are patrons of the Institute, after all.

ARCHIVIST

Fine, fine, I'll be more lovely. Now, can I get back to work?

ELIAS

Very well. By the way, have you seen Martin?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, he's off sick this week. Stomach problems, I think.

[Elias leaves]

Blessed relief if you ask me.

Statement resumes.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

It was worst when Jared visited the library, because that inevitably meant that he was bored enough to seek me out for harassment. Sure enough, he started chatting with me, meaningless jibes that served to wait it out until Ruth, who didn't know about Jared's problems with me, returned to her office and closed the door. As soon as she had done so, he turned, and, in a single movement, tipped over the metal returns cart, spilling the recently received

books all over the floor. He smiled at me and apologised. I did my best not to show any irritation, or indeed any reaction at all as I slowly walked around and bent down to start collecting them. As I rose to my feet, I felt an impact on the back of my head, and staggered.

Behind me, Jared stood holding the book I had put aside, *The Boneturner's Tale,* and had apparently picked it up to hit me with. But rather than offering me a fake apology, or further violence, instead his eyes were locked on the book. We stood there in silence for a few seconds, until he said something about needing something new to read, turned around, and walked off.

I was, I will admit, a bit unsettled. As far as I could recall I had never seen Jared read… well, anything, really. And the look in his eyes when he had left had something in it not entirely unlike fear. Still, it was a welcome relief to have him gone, and I quickly tidied up the rest of the books before Ruth noticed anything amiss.

There was nothing else I recall that happened that day at the library, but on the way home afterwards, I passed by Jared's house. I had moved back in with my parents while I got everything sorted out after university, and he had never moved out of his childhood home, so we still lived on the same street. It was late September at this point, so by the time I had walked back from the library it was dark, and I noticed a small shape moving in the pool of orange light below the streetlamp.

As I got closer, I realised with a slight start that it was a rat, and not

a dirty, wild rat but a large, white one, quite well-kept and clearly once a pet. But there was something very wrong with it. It was dragging itself slowly, pulling from the front legs, and I saw that the back half of it was flat, as though deflated somehow. I thought it must have been run over, but there was no blood or sign of crushing, nor did it seem to be in any actual pain. It just had a back half that flopped and twitched obscenely as it made its gradual way across the lighted pavement and out into the darkness. I just stood there and watched, transfixed by it, until it disappeared from view. Thinking about it now, I remember its head was turned at a strange angle, far further round than it should have been, although I might be getting confused. Many of these experiences run together when I look back on them. There was no light on in Jared's house, but I hurried home quickly after that.

I didn't see Jared again for some time. At first I was just happy for the space, but as the days turned into weeks I started to feel something I wouldn't have expected to – worry. If it hadn't been for the way he had left last time, it probably wouldn't have bothered me, but he had looked so strange, and even without him coming to the library, it was rare I would go a week without seeing him. By now it had almost been a month. Still, I resisted the urge to go to his house and check. If it turned out he was fine, then I'd be inviting a whole world of unpleasantness, and besides that, I reminded myself, he wasn't my problem anymore.

It was late October when Jared's mother came in. It was near the end of the day, and outside was already dark. I was putting up a

display about good Hallowe'en reads before heading home, when I heard the door open. I turned around and there she was. It took me a few seconds to recognise her, if I'm honest. I hadn't seen much of her in the years since Jared and I had been close, and she had aged noticeably. Mrs. Hopworth wore a bulky overcoat, though it wasn't that cold yet, and her arm hung down in a sling. Something about the angle of the arm and how it hung there seemed faintly abnormal, and I wondered if she had broken it.

When I asked Mrs. Hopworth if she was okay, she just stared at me, her eyes burning with hatred. With her good arm she reached into her coat and pulled out a small, black paperback. She threw it on the floor without saying a word and turned to leave. I couldn't help myself, I asked her if Jared was alright. She spun back and started to swear violently at me, told me I had no business with her son and that I, and my books, were to stay away from him. As she spoke, I couldn't look away from her arm and the odd ways it twisted as she gestured. How her fingers seemed to bend the wrong way. I was glad that Ruth had gone home early, as I didn't want her to witness the disturbing confrontation I had now apparently caused.

When she had finished, Mrs. Hopworth spat towards me, though I noticed she was careful to avoid spitting at the book that now lay on the floor between us, and left. I put down the copy of Stephen King's *Misery* that I now realised I'd been clutching, and approached the discarded volume that lay on the carpet. The battered black cover seemed the same as when I had first seen it weeks ago, with

that faded white title on the front: *The Boneturner's Tale.* I reached down to pick it up, but before I did so a thought flashed across my mind, a memory of the last time I had seen Jared, and I grabbed some tissues from the desk before using them to pick up the book. Even then I felt my skin crawl as I held it.

I decided not to deal with it that night. I wasn't entirely sure that reading it in the daytime would be that much better, but shadows cast from outside seemed to have gotten that much starker since the book had been brought back into my library, and it scared me. I placed it in the book returns cart and left, double-checking I had firmly locked the door behind me.

It rained heavily that night. My room is in a converted attic, and when the weather is bad, it's as if I can hear every raindrop against the window that is just above my bed. It wasn't a storm, there wasn't the wind for it, it was just that heavy pounding rain that drummed and beat on the glass above me. I couldn't sleep. There was a nagging apprehension in my mind, something that after three hours lying in bed had turned into almost a panic. How could I have just left the book? There was something wrong with it, that much was obvious. What if Ruth came in earlier than I did tomorrow and took it? What would happen to her? Should I have destroyed it?

That last thought was quickly pushed away. I wasn't sure I had it in me to destroy a book, even one with such a strangeness to it. It surprised me just how easily I accepted that *The Boneturner's Tale* had dark powers, but I suppose I've always felt that books have a

sort of magic to them, so it was really just a confirmation of what I had suspected, deep down, for a long time.

It was two in the morning when I decided that I couldn't just leave it there overnight. I got up, dressed, and quietly headed out into the rain towards the library, making sure to take my gloves. My coat was supposed to be water resistant, but still managed to soak in the twenty minutes it took me to walk there. I had the key from locking up that night, and deactivated the alarm as I entered.

It was almost pitch black inside, and part of me wanted to keep it that way, but I turned on as many of the lights as I could without it being immediately obvious outside the building. It wasn't many, and I still had to half-feel my way through the foyer and into the library proper. As I approached the desk, and the book returns cart where I had left *The Boneturner's Tale,* I began to step less cautiously. It was darker in that corner of the library, and I put a hand out to steady myself against the handle of the small metal cart. I'd taken my gloves off at that point, and my hand came away wet. I quickly fumbled for the torch I had snatched before heading out and turned it on. Red dripped and pulsed from the cart, soaking the pages and forming a small pool around it. The books were bleeding.

I laughed at that. It seemed so appropriate somehow, so utterly correct that those neighbouring books should suffer, should be contaminated by it. Just as it seemed right and proper that, when my torch found *The Boneturner's Tale,* it was dry, unmarked by the gory scene around it.

I put my gloves back on, and carefully took out that sinister volume and placed it on the desk. Perhaps I should have fought harder against the temptation to look inside, but my curiosity was too strong. The thick gloves made turning individual pages almost impossible, and I still had enough good sense to keep them on, so I just opened it on a few random pages and started reading. Perhaps I was being paranoid. After all, I touched the book with my bare hands when it was first given in to the library, and had no problems, but the image of Jared's mother wouldn't leave my head. How her arm had twisted when it moved. I decided to keep the gloves on.

It was written in prose, and certainly seemed to be a story of some kind. The part I read dealt with an unnamed man, at various points referred to as the Boneturner, the Bonesmith or just the Turner, watching an assembled group of people as they made their way into a small village. It's unclear from what I read whether he is travelling with them, or simply following them, but I remember being unsettled by the details he observed in them: the way the parson would move his hand over his mouth whenever he stared too long at the nuns or how the cook looked at the meat he prepared with the same eyes that looked at the pardoner. It was only at that point that I realised the book was describing the pilgrims from *The Canterbury Tales.*

Now, this certainly wasn't some lost section of a Chaucer classic. It was written in modern English, with none of the archaic spelling or pronunciation of the original, and besides that the writing itself was

of questionable quality. There was something compelling about it, though. The debate about how finished *The Canterbury Tales* were… well, it's a very real debate. In the Prologue, over a hundred tales are promised, but the most complete surviving version doesn't even reach two dozen. The book just sort of ends, with Chaucer adding a short epilogue imploring God for forgiveness. A plea that is generally read as sarcastic or rhetorical.

I flicked ahead a few pages, and found the Bonesmith had apparently crept up to the Miller while he slept. It described him silently reaching inside him, and… it's a bit hazy. All I remember clearly is the line "and from his rib a flute to play that merry tune of marrow took". And as for the rest, I don't recall in detail, but I know that I almost threw up, and that the Miller did not survive. This was on page sixteen, and it was a thick book.

I turned to the frontispiece, desperately curious as to how this book had ended up in our library. In the harsh light of the torch, I could see the creases and peeling edges of the Chiswick Library label, which usually meant it had been removed and re-stuck, or taken from another book entirely. I could even see the edges of another label underneath. Using a pair of scissors, I carefully peeled off the top one, but was disappointed. It was the label for another library, probably the last place it had been left, although I think it must have been in Scandinavia, because it was something like the library of Jergensburg or Jurgenleit or Jurgerlicht or something like that. It didn't help me.

I was all set to return to reading the thing, when I heard the sound

of breaking glass behind me. I turned around to see Jared Hopworth standing in front of the shattered window. Or at least, I assume it was Jared, as it demanded the book from me in Jared's voice, but wore lose fitting trousers, and a thick coat with a hood that almost completely covered his face. Or its face.

He was longer than Jared had been, and stood at a strange angle, as though his legs were too stiff to use. When he gestured for the book, I saw that his fingers looked… sharp, as though the skin at the ends were being pushed into a tight point by something inside. I told him that the library was closed, because at that moment I could think of nothing else to say. He ignored me, and demanded again that I give him the book. That was when I did something a little rash, which is to say I punched him.

I had never really thrown a punch in anger before, or even desperation, so it came as quite a shock to me when I managed to drive a single, solid fist into his solar plexus. But as I did this, and this is the part that still gives me nightmares, I felt his flesh give way and almost retract, drawing me in close. And then I felt his ribs shift, shut tight around my hand, as though his ribcage were trying to bite me. They were sharper then I would have thought possible, and at last, this was what actually started me screaming. Never before or since have I ever screamed like that, and I'm still a bit surprised I'm capable of making such a noise, but there you have it.

In my panic I dropped the copy of *The Boneturner's Tale* and, in less than a second, Jared was on it. He released my hand and grabbed it with a frantic desperation, before he turned to run back out the way

he came in. I started to chase after him, until I saw how he was moving. How many limbs he had. He had… added some extras. That was the moment it finally all got too much for me; I stopped running. It wasn't my book, it wasn't my responsibility and I had no idea what I was dealing with, so I didn't. I just stood there in a daze and watched the thing that was once Jared disappear out into the rain. I never saw him again.

The police turned up soon after. Someone had apparently heard my screams and called in a report. I spun some tale about falling asleep at my desk and being woken up by an attempted robbery. God knows how I explained the bloody books, because it wasn't some disappearing phantom. It took weeks to get out. Everyone seemed to believe me, though, and miraculously I kept my job. I haven't seen Jared in the years since, and I haven't done any further research on the book. The best scenario I can possibly imagine is that this statement is the last I ever need to hear or speak about Jared Hopworth or *The Boneturner's Tale*.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Well, this makes me… deeply unhappy. I've barely scratched the surface of the archives, and have already uncovered evidence of two separate surviving books from Jurgen Leitner's library. Until he mentioned that, I was tempted to dismiss much of it out of hand, but as it stands now I believe every word. I've seen what Leitner's work can do, and this news, even 17 years out of date, is still very

concerning to me. I'm going to have a discussion with Elias as to what we can do to address the issue. I know he'll just give me the old "record and study, not interfere or contain" speech again, but I at least need to make him aware of it.

Tim and Sasha have cross-referenced the events here with police reports, and sure enough, there was a warrant issued for the arrest of Jared Hopworth for breaking and entering, as well as assault. He was never found, though, and the crimes weren't serious enough to keep the case active for very long. I've been doing as much research myself as possible, but the book seems to have vanished along with him.

I asked Martin to try and hunt down Mr. Adekoya himself for a follow-up, but have been informed that he passed away in 2006. He was found lying dead in the middle of the road on the night of April 17th. Despite the fact that there were no crushing or trauma marks on the body, the inquest ruled it a hit-and-run car accident, due to the mangled position in which he was found. It was a closed casket funeral.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG018 – The Man Upstairs

Statement #0081212

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Christof Rudenko, regarding his interactions with a first floor resident of Welbeck House, Wandsworth. Original statement given December 12th, 2008. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Never buy a ground floor flat. It may seem like a good idea, especially if, like me, you just spent a decade dragging shopping up three flights of stairs every week, but it's noisier, always has a worse view, and is far more prone to break-ins and other… problems. And then there is the matter of upstairs neighbours. I know that higher floors will, more often than not, also have people living above you, and moving from living in a top floor flat to the ground floor like I did is not a common thing, but it's still true. I never had any real concerns about it until I moved to the ground floor of Welbeck House. These days I keep a much closer eye on those I live near.

Welbeck House is a five-storey block of flats in Wandsworth town centre, a great area to live, actually. It's close enough to London proper that you can commute in easily, and enough amenities that you don't often need to, especially if, like me, you're self-employed. It wasn't cheap, but I've always been good with money, so when I decided to try and actually buy a place at age thirty four, I was able to afford a nice flat. After almost a year of searching, I settled on the ground floor at Welbeck. At the time, I hadn't really given much thought to my neighbours – those I had encountered in the course of buying the place had seemed nice enough, and the previous owners of my flat hadn't mentioned anything.

On the day I moved in – this would have been late 2002 – I saw a man smoking, leaning out of the window just above my own. It was a grey, overcast day and the forecast had said there would be rain later, so I was keen to move the last of my boxes inside and start unpacking, and didn't really pay him much attention. I remember that he was wearing a hooded jacket, though, pulled up tight and obscuring most of his face. We locked eyes briefly – at least I assume we did – I couldn't see his eyes but I felt him looking at me – and I could swear I smelled the weirdest odour. It's hard to describe, halfway between the smell of a pavement after rain on a hot day and chicken that's starting to turn. It was unpleasant, to say the least, but the wind changed, and it was gone as quickly as it came. The man in the upstairs window kept watching as I took my boxes inside, just continuing to smoke in silence, 'til at one point I came outside to get the last bits, and noticed he was gone.

I was slightly spooked by the encounter. It's hard to say exactly why, as aside from the smell, which could have come from anywhere, there was nothing outwardly upsetting about it, yet something in the man's manner had shaken me. I didn't even know at the time whether it was a man, that was just an assumption I made, but I certainly had no plans to check. I'm quite a private person, so the idea of going round and trying to meet my neighbours at all was not one that I gave a lot of consideration, let alone this one, who had spent the better part of half an hour staring at me. I decided to ignore the whole thing, and get on with the process of moving in.

I was very successful at ignoring the man upstairs, at least at first. It wasn't difficult, as he was usually quiet and rarely came out of his flat as far as I could tell. In fact, as the time in my new home wore on I started to recognise the other residents of Welbeck House: the white family that lived across the hall, with their little girl – I sometimes heard her in the evening, loudly protesting her bedtime; the old spinster next door – Dianne, I think her name was, or Diana; the Asian guy on the first floor that worked nights and slammed the doors too much. I doubt I ever exchanged more than a dozen words with any of them but I began to know their sounds and their habits.

In all that time, though, I'm not sure I ever saw the man who lived above me. Not in the hallway, not out the window, it was like he didn't exist, which was fine by me, except that I would still very occasionally catch a whiff of that smell. Rotten and earthy, it would catch me by surprise and I'd usually spend a minute trying to track

it down before it vanished. Once, I swear that as I stopped to look around, I heard the door upstairs close quietly.

It seemed to me pretty obvious it was him. It wasn't ideal, but his hygiene problem was nobody's business but his own, and having figured out the source of the smell, it stopped bothering me quite so much, on those rare moments that I caught it in the air currents of our building. It didn't enter my home, although I did take to lighting scented candles just in case – a habit I still keep up today. I decided all that was important to me was that he was quiet, which he was. At least, for the first couple of years.

The banging started on 5th July, 2004. I know because it was the day before my thirty-seventh birthday, and I was unpacking a crate of beer for the friends I had invited over. At first I assumed the man upstairs was just nailing something into the wall but after ten minutes it still hadn't stopped. Instead, it just seemed to move. While at first it had sounded like something being nailed into his wall, the banging started to move downwards, until it seemed he was knocking things right into the floor. At one point he was hammering directly over the light, causing it to sway slightly with each blow.

This went on for almost an hour, and all I could do was try to ignore it, as there was nothing I wanted to do less than climb those stairs and knock on his door. Even so, by the time it finally finished I was on the verge of doing exactly that. It did stop, though, and after it became clear it wasn't coming back any time soon, I tried to put it out of my mind and get back to my preparations.

Thankfully, there was no disturbance from upstairs during my small party the following night, just the family from across the hall at one point asking for the music to be turned down. In fact, I didn't hear anything from him for another two weeks, when the banging started again. Again it was almost an hour of hammering, first into the walls, then moving down onto the floor, before stopping altogether.

I was not happy about this, as I'm sure you can imagine, but I was still reluctant to confront this nameless person who lived over me, so I let it slide. From that point on, every two weeks it came, the hammering, for an hour or thereabouts. I tried to find someone to complain to, but it seemed like whoever lived there owned the flat outright, so there was no landlord or housing association that I could report him to.

The final straw came about six months later; it was actually a very simple thing. I got a package delivered incorrectly to my flat. It was addressed to Mr. Toby Carlisle, and the flat number on it was not mine but that of my upstairs neighbour. The envelope was thick and soft, must have been mainly full of bubblewrap or other packing material. It wasn't much, but it gave me another reason to go upstairs and, while delivering it, I could politely request that he stop his fortnightly hammering.

It was harder than I thought to walk up those stairs and I was surprised to find that my legs were shaking slightly as I reached the top. I got another whiff of that dank, rotten smell as I approached. The carpet immediately in front of the door was stained ever-so-

slightly, a darker colour than it should have been, as though something had leaked out from underneath it. The wood was old and worn compared to the others in the building, which looked to have been replaced relatively recently. There was no number on it, or any indication that it was, in fact, Toby Carlisle who lived there. I knocked, trying to give the action a confidence that I frankly did not feel.

There was no answer, so I knocked again, louder this time, and I heard some movement from inside, gradually heading towards the door. The steps were muffled, like he was walking over thick carpet, until they stopped on the other side. There was no sound at all.

I waited for a minute, and was just about to knock again when the door opened, just a crack. There didn't seem to be any lights on inside; it wasn't open wide enough for me to get a good look or even see the man himself, but it was enough that I heard when a cracked, ragged voice spoke. It said, "What do you want?"

Through that crack I was hit by a sudden wave of that rancid air and reeled backwards, fighting back the urge to vomit. Through it, I just about managed to stammer out the question as to whether he was Toby Carlisle, that I'd had a delivery for him. There was silence for a second, then a hand shot out and grabbed the package I held, pulling it out of my grasp before I had a chance to fully realise what was happening. The hand was thin and pale, with long, filthy yellow fingernails. On the back I saw a single dark red mark, that might have been a cut or a lesion, but it was gone before I had a chance to see it in more detail.

The door slammed in my face, and I was left standing in the hall, nauseous and confused. As I turned to go, I noticed that there was a spot of viscous liquid on my jacket sleeve, where the hand had brushed me, thick and off-white. I had to throw the jacket out, in the end. I couldn't rid of the smell.

And so that was it for a long time. The man upstairs was named Toby and he was a disgusting shut-in who smelled rancid and occasionally made hammering noises. It was a long way from ideal, but it was something I could understand and live with. Two years passed like this, and I had almost forgotten about him, to be honest. He had become just another part of my life and could be lived around.

It wasn't until late 2007 I had cause to really think about him again. My mother's health had taken a turn for the worst over the previous few months, and I had made the decision to move back up to Sheffield to be nearer to her. As I mentioned, I'm self-employed so the move wasn't as much of a difficulty as it might have been, but it did leave me with the need to sell my flat. I don't want to get bogged down with the details of my mother's ailments; in the end, she actually passed away a few months later, from complications following an operation. I still ended up moving, though for a very different reason.

It was difficult to sell the place. Every time someone came round for a viewing it ended the same way, and I started to dread when the inevitable question would come: what's that smell? It was the third time that the potential buyers, a nice professional couple who

worked in the City, pointed out the stain on the living room ceiling. It was subtle at first, a slight discolouration that I had managed to overlook. They assumed it was a leak, and I did too, promising to have a plumber come over and check it out, though I didn't hear back from them anyway.

I did call for a plumber, but for whatever reason was told that it would be another week before they could see me. I tried to have a couple more viewings in that time, but the stain on the ceiling was becoming more obvious, and the smell had begun to pervade my whole flat, to the point where I was thinking about staying in a hotel until the plumber arrived. I was starting to doubt it was a leaking water pipe. As it grew, it started to turn a dark yellow in colour, and glistened ever so slightly when the light hit it. I knew it was something to do with the flat upstairs, though when I went up to ask this time, my knocking went unanswered.

Finally, the plumber arrived. He wrinkled his nose when he entered, though didn't make any comment about it. I assume unpleasant smells are just a part of his job. I pointed him towards the stain on the ceiling, and he looked momentarily confused, before telling me what I already knew – that this didn't look like a problem with the pipes. Still, he said he'd need to knock through the ceiling to have a look, and I'd need a contractor to come and redo that bit of ceiling anyway. I stood back when he put up his stepladder and climbed up to have a look at it. He put on a pair of rubber gloves and gingerly touched the spot, testing it with his fingers. It collapsed almost immediately, buckling and tearing like wet cardboard, and the fluid

that oozed out of it was a sickly yellow in colour, with viscous white lumps glistening in it. The plumber looked like he was going to throw up. I did throw up. He made his apologies, and said he'd have to call someone. I didn't try to stop him leaving.

I was furious, and the anger that surged through me overcame any apprehension I might have felt from approaching the flat upstairs. I stormed up and began to hammer on the door, shouting and threatening that I'd call the police if he didn't answer. On my third knock the door swung inwards ever-so-slightly, and I realised it was not locked. There is… little in my life that I regret quite as much as going inside.

I pushed the door open as much as I could but it didn't open very wide, as there seemed to be some sort of resistance behind it. The smell would have been overpowering, but by this point I was almost used to it, and fought down the nausea. There was no light coming from inside, and I fumbled on the wall for a switch. I found it, and the instant before I flicked it on, I realised I felt something soft and wet on the wall next to it. Unfortunately, before I had a chance to fully comprehend what I was feeling, I had turned on the light and saw Toby Carlisle's flat in its entirety.

The light that came on was weak and tinged with red, but it was enough to see by. I looked around, and saw that every surface, the walls, the floor, the tables, everything except the curtained windows, was covered in meat. Steaks, chunks of chicken, even a whole leg of what I assume was once lamb, had been nailed everywhere. There were layers of it, the newest additions simply

stuck on top of the old, and a putrid yellow-white rot could be seen where the oldest pieces had long since turned to liquid. Flies buzzed thick in the air, and maggots carpeted the place. Looking up, I saw the light too, had been smeared with meat, causing the place to be bathed in that dull red light.

Lying there, in the centre of the hallway, was the body of Toby Carlisle. His hood was pulled back and I saw his face was covered in puckered, septic lesions and holes. I couldn't tell which of them had once housed his eyes.

I was frozen in place by the raw horror of what I was seeing, and almost automatically my hand found its way to my phone and I dialled the police. It was only then that my eyes drifted numbly towards the kitchen. There, in the centre of the floor, was a pile of discarded meat and bone, stacked almost as high as a person. It seemed less decayed than the rest of it, though that foul yellow fluid oozed from it and – this is the reason I'm talking to your institute, you see.

Everything else could be put down to the problems of a very, very sick man, nothing supernatural about it, but… when I looked at that heaped pile of meat, it moved. I don't know how… I don't know quite how to explain it, other than to tell you that it opened its eyes. It opened all its eyes.

The next thing I remember is the police's arrival, and a lot of questions from officers trying to hide the fact that they had just finished vomiting. The pile of meat was gone, though the bits that

had been nailed to the walls and floors remained. I told the police everything that I just told you, although they dismissed the last bit out of hand. I believe they had to call in a hazmat team in the end.

There's not much more to it, really. The rest of the story is largely arguing with insurance companies, and counting how many showers it took before I felt clean again. I did move out, in the end, and now live in a house in Clapham with some friends. People who are very clean, and don't mind the fact that I have recently become a vegetarian.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Well, I'm certainly glad I had my lunch before recording this statement. Looking into this one has proven a bit tricky, as police, hospital and even fire department records give wildly conflicting reports. What we can be sure of is that, on the evening of October the 22nd, 2007, there was an incident at a first floor flat in Welbeck House that involved hazardous biological material, and led to the recovery of the body of one Toby Carlisle, the legal owner of the property. The cause of death was listed as gangrene.

We contacted Mr. Rudenko, who confirmed that since moving he had had no further experiences he believed to be linked to these events, and after an extensive course of counselling was attempting to move past them. He did corroborate the existing statement, though, saying he still believed it to be a true account of what

happened to him. I'm not entirely sure I agree, although obviously there's little in the way of evidence to the contrary.

One thing puzzles me, however. Sasha managed to get access to some of Toby Carlisle's old financial records and it didn't appear like he had any real money coming in, and what he did have was largely going to pay council tax on the property. There are no records of transactions at any supermarkets or online delivery firms, and Tim even asked round some of the local butchers, as Martin is still off sick. At the end of all this, we've still been unable to answer one question: where was he getting the meat? I don't know why, but it bothers me.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG019 – Confession

Statement #0113005

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Father Edwin Burroughs, regarding his claimed demonic possession. Original statement given May 30th, 2011. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Thank you for coming. I know that this can't have been easy to arrange, and I appreciate the opportunity to make my statement. The Prison Service probably didn't make it easy for you. They're understandably hesitant to give anyone extended access to me, in case I get violent, but I'm very glad they made an exception for you. At least, assuming that you're real. I hope you're real, but maybe it's that hope that's being used against me in a cruel joke. Or maybe the joke would be that I would let that doubt cost me my only chance to tell my story. Either way, I choose to make my statement, and if you're not real, then hopefully, no harm done.

We'll get to the cannibalism, of course, but first I just want to provide some context. I don't know how much you work with the Church in your Institute. You may be surprised that a man of the cloth such as myself, however far from grace I may have fallen, would enlist the aid of an organisation dedicated to studying the paranormal. Well, to be honest, it's generally kept quiet, but the Catholic Church is not against belief in the supernatural outside of the official doctrine. Demons, ghosts, black magic… It's generally up to the individual how much they believe in these things, and I believe that very much of what you research is real. Dangerous, but real. I've always seen the Devil's work as a very tangible thing, and those priests who might speak of them as metaphor or symbol are, I fear, often placing themselves and their parishioners in a position of peril. Sorry, this is becoming a homily. It's just been some time since I've had a chance to express myself like this; I almost don't care if it is on one of Its phantasms.

So it was only natural, I suppose, that it was relatively early in my vocation as a priest that I trained as an exorcist. It's not something all that special really, every diocese should have a trained exorcist available, or failing that a bishop can do it, but nine times out of ten the duties of an exorcist are to recommend a good psychiatrist, doctor or substance abuse program, and bishops don't usually have time for that.

I was an exorcist for the Diocese of Oxford when this all happened. I trained as a Jesuit, so I was used to moving about a lot, but I was at Oxford from about 2005 right through to my arrest in 2009.

There were two exorcists in the diocese, myself and an old Augustinian by the name of Father Harrogate. I would ask as a favour that you not follow up with him; he plays no part in what happened to me and would, I think, be upset by any reminder of my actions.

In my time I have performed just over one hundred exorcisms, with varying degrees of success. It was relatively rare that it felt like much more than a blessing or a prayer. It still helped in most cases, but as one of the most common types of possession is not The Exorcist-style of speaking in a demonic tongue and floating off the bed, but rather that of an unnatural depression, it was often hard to be sure. It is difficult to say how many were devout believers who came to us with a very natural depression, and simply preferred to look to the Church than to counselling or medicine. Even those were helped to some degree, I believe, even if only as a placebo. On a few occasions, though I did encounter things that served to firm up my belief in the Devil and my faith in my Lo- my L- I'm sorry, It won't let me say the words. It won't let me pray either, but I hope I will not be judged too harshly for it on the final day.

As I was saying, there were times when I felt things pushing back. I was once cursed at in Sumerian by a young man who was utterly illiterate, and had the names of my childhood pets thrown at me by an old Jamaican man. I will admit that there were times that I have been very afraid of what I was trying to remove, but I always had faith in Je- I always had faith. None of it prepared me for what happened on Bullingdon Road, though. That was something else

entirely.

I was doing some work at the Catholic chaplaincy in Saint Aldates, generally trying to help the spiritual well-being of the students who came to us, when Father Singh, one of the other priests working there, came to me. He said he had a student from Saint Hugh's asking after an exorcism, and wanted to refer her to me. I told him of course, and he set up a meeting between us. The student's name was Bethany O'Connor, and much of what she told me was under the seal of confession, something I will not break even now, so suffice it to say she believed that she was no longer in control of her own mind.

Even as we talked, she spent much of her time looking around or staring into my eyes with what I can only describe as pointed suspicion. Bethany told me that her will was still her own but she could no longer trust her senses, and had found herself doing much that she did not understand.

I remember one moment very clearly, in our second meeting I believe. We were taking a walk around the botanical gardens, as she said it calmed her when talking of her problem. She reached into her bag, took out what appeared to be a small slab of stone, slate, I think, and started to lift it to her mouth as if to eat it. I asked her what she was doing, and she stopped, looked at the rock she held in her hand, and threw it away before bursting into tears. She told me that it felt like something was in her head, changing what she saw and felt and thought.

I asked when this had started, and she told me it was after she had moved out of her college halls and into a house on Bullingdon Road with her friends. I suggested that perhaps it had something to do with the stresses of entering second year, but she insisted it was something to do with the house. Finally, after several discussions, I agreed to look over the house and perform a small blessing in case there was anything wrong with the place, spiritually speaking.

It was a cold morning in December, near the end of Michaelmas term, when I visited 89 Bullingdon Road. It was an old house, though not so old as to be unusual in that part of Oxford, and had clearly once been a small family house, now partitioned by the lettings agency to house as many students as possible. Bethany told me that there were six of them living there at the time. I went around the house, looking for signs of anything amiss but found nothing that seemed out of the ordinary. Bethany kept asking me if I “felt any evil” in the house, and I tried to explain to her that priests unfortunately don’t have the power to simply sense the presence of evil.

I didn’t realise how unfortunate that was, at least not until we got her room. It was on the first floor at the back of the house, and was a long, thin bedroom, easily the biggest. It was adorned in typical student fashion with movie posters and flat-pack bookshelves, but my attention was immediately taken by a large patch of wall where the wallpaper had been crudely hacked away to reveal the bare brickwork underneath. Written there, in faded blue paint, was a single word: Mentis.

I'd been out of seminary for some years at this point, and had never been one for the Latin Mass, but I still knew the word for 'mind'. My immediate assumption was that Bethany had painted it in some sort of mania, but looking closer, I saw that the paint was far too old to have been done since she moved in. It looked more as though it had been painted on the wall and then covered up with layers of wallpaper over the years, until finally being unearthed by stripping it away.

What was slightly more concerning, was that watching Bethany pace around the room, following my gaze with some confusion, was that she didn't seem able to see it. When I asked her what the word on the wall meant to her, she looked at me as though I was talking nonsense.

I didn't seem like there was much more to be gained there at that point, so I performed a short blessing over the place, took some photographs, and told Bethany that I would have to come back later once I'd looked into a few things. She seemed disappointed there wasn't anything more immediate that I was doing, but didn't try to argue. And so I left what would turn out to be my first visit to the house on Bullingdon Road, calling Father Singh to arrange a meeting the next day where we could discuss whether to attempt a full exorcism.

It was at that meeting that I got the call from the hospital. Bethany had been admitted with severe facial lacerations and was asking to see me immediately. I made my way to the John Radcliffe as soon as I was able and was surprised to see two police officers standing

near her bed. I was met by Anne Willett, the nurse who Bethany had asked to call me. I knew Annie a bit already, as she'd attended the church where I ministered and I recognised her from the congregation. She explained to me that Bethany had apparently attempted to attack one of her housemates with a kitchen knife, and in the ensuing struggle ended up falling head first into a full-length mirror, cutting herself very badly.

I was, to put it mildly, somewhat taken aback. This was such an escalation from what Bethany had described before, and I was starting to fear that if I didn't manage to do something the poor girl would most likely end up locked away somewhere. Annie was convinced that an exorcism was the only way, and so finally, I agreed to do so. I had already got permission from the Bishop, but that was before Bethany's hospitalisation, and I would have preferred to discuss it with him. Still, it was clear she was getting worse and I decided to take a risk and try it anyway.

It was a stupid risk to take. I was cocky and complacent, full of spiritual pride and an eagerness to test my faith against whatever was inside of Bethany's soul, not even considering that I might be risking it. Still, I have paid dearly for my hubris.

We waited until the police had taken their statements and left, and then I set up and began the exorcism. It went… unusually. There was no resistance from Bethany, almost no reaction at all, and in many parts of the ceremony where in my experience there was usually a response either from the demon, or at least the victim, there was instead just… silence, as she stared at me with a look,

almost seemed like pity. Annie just stood in the corner, watching and clearly eager to help, despite the fear I saw in her eyes. At last, Bethany locked eyes with me and slowly shook her head. “I’m so sorry,” she said, “It wants your faith.”

Without warning she began to convulse. Thrashing in obvious pain. I tried to continue the ritual, but the doctors pushed past me, desperately trying to help Bethany as blood began to pour from her mouth where she had bitten into her tongue. In the end they couldn’t save her. Brain haemorrhage, they said, probably from the blow to head when she hit the mirror and they just hadn’t spotted it.

I was asked to leave in no uncertain terms, and the doctors made it very clear that I may not have been the one that hit her in the head, but they held me very much accountable for her death. I was also given a very thorough dressing down by my Bishop, who told me to take a step back and leave the exorcisms to Father Harrogate for some time. Annie almost got suspended over the matter, but in the end was spared further disciplinary action, as she had been simply passing on the wishes of the patient.

And for a couple of years that was it. I felt a great deal of guilt over my involvement with Bethany’s death, and I started to drink more than I had before. I was never, I think, in danger of becoming an alcoholic, as most of the priests I worked with had done work with substance abusers – not to mention the fact that priests are certainly not immune to alcoholism – and would have picked up on the warning signs. But they did express concern over the occasional

disappearance of bottles of sacramental wine. At the time, I was sure it wasn't me. I preferred scotch, and the Muscatel wine they bought had never really been to my taste, but looking back, I can't really be sure what I was drinking. I know it's something of a jump from unwittingly stealing holy wine to my later crimes, but I'm trying my best to fit this into a relatively coherent narrative.

Apart from that, the years passed uneventfully, and I was starting to feel like I'd put the whole affair behind me. Until I got a call from Annie. She said that a gentleman had been admitted to the John Radcliffe after having something of a scare in a house up on Hill Top Road. I explained to her that I wasn't performing exorcisms at the moment, and said she should talk to Father Harrogate. She assured me it wouldn't need a full exorcism, and if I did we could bring him in, but she didn't know or trust Father Harrogate, but just wanted my opinion. Finally, after a lot of pestering, I agreed to pay a visit to the house.

It was late when I got there, and starting to get very cold. The whole affair was starting to bring back some less than pleasant memories of my arrival at Bullingdon Road all those years ago. I was also a bit annoyed at Annie for not mentioning that the house was still under construction, not only making it unlikely to be the haunt of demons or spirits, but also meaning that the coat I had brought along would be somewhat inadequate against the chill in a house without windows.

I knocked on the door and one of the builders opened it. I forget his name, I'm afraid, something Polish I think, or maybe Czech? He

seemed confused at first as to why I was there, but I explained and it turned out he was the one that had been treated by Annie at the hospital. She had not mentioned the builder's possible schizophrenia to me, but I began to fear that this may be a waste of time. Still, I had a look around and asked the builder questions about the place. He certainly did have an interesting story, but I was unsure of how much of it I believed.

Eventually, I decided that I'd seen enough and that there didn't seem to be any malicious presence here. The builder was looking at me in such a way as to make me hesitant to tell him that, so I decided I would at least give the place a quick prayer or blessing. I asked him to wait outside, though. Something in his manner was a bit off-putting and I felt uncomfortable with him watching me like a hawk, as though I were about to vanish at any moment.

He headed into the back garden, and I was alone in the house. I moved into the hallway and began to pray, praying for protection and sprinkling holy water around from a flask I carry on me in these situations.

As I spoke the words I felt something… alarming. I was starting to grow very hot, as though the room was heating up very rapidly. I looked around for the source of the heat, but the radiators hadn't been installed yet and I couldn't see anything else that might be warming the room. It continued, though, and soon I was sweating through my shirt. I began to cough, and I could smell smoke, even though I couldn't see any or any fire, for that matter.

I fell to one knee and choked back a scream as I felt my skin begin to crackle and burn. I began to pray again for protection, not for the place this time, but for me. As I did, I felt… something answer me. And yet, I cannot stress this enough: what answered was not G-God. It wasn't Him. Something else answered my call for protection. I felt my lips move. They made no sound that I could hear, but I felt them form every syllable. "I am not for you. I am marked."

The heat slowed in its increase but it did not stop. My mouth continued to speak for me, when I heard the sound of a car engine outside and a great crash. Instantly, the feeling was gone, as though it were never there, and looking out, I saw the builder had managed to uproot a tree from the back garden. I sat there for a while catching my breath, and when he came back inside, I told him I had completed the prayers and excused myself quickly. It was the first time I had experienced –

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Unfortunately, this statement as it stands is incomplete, and stops at this point. It does not appear to be the actual end of the document, so I have hopes that the rest is simply misfiled somewhere else in the archives. If this is the case, I will record and add that part when it is found, either by myself or, given the scale of the Archive's mismanagement, by my successor when I pass away from old age.

With this in mind, all but the most preliminary of investigations

into this statement are being put on hold until the rest is found. Most of the details do appear to be correct and match the statement given by Mr. Ivo Lensik in 2007. We did find Father Burroughs' arrest record, though, and I am very curious to see how the events recounted here could have led to the incident in 2009, wherein he apparently murdered two first year university students following Sunday Mass, and then peeled off and ate most of their skin.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG020 - Desecrated Host

Statement #00113005-B

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Continuation of the statement of Father Edwin Burroughs, regarding his claimed demonic possession. Original statement given May 30th, 2011. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement continues.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

It was the first time I had experienced anything like that. By this point, I was starting to suspect that I may have been having hallucinations of some sort, but I had never before felt a… a presence within myself, inside my being. It was a feeling so utterly awful it's hard to put it into words. Like a reflex reaction, your muscles moving without any instruction from your mind, but rather than a quick twitch of the leg, it's a slow movement of your jaw, your lips, forming your mouth into words. Worse things were to come, of course, but I don't think any of them were so profoundly unsettling as that feeling.

I only got a few streets away from Hill Top Road before I was no longer able to maintain my equilibrium and fell to the floor, violently throwing up. I could not deny then that there was something inside me, and I believed that whatever it was had entered me from Bethany O'Connor. I tried to pray, tried to cast my mind to G- I couldn't. As I tried, my throat closed and I struggled to breathe.

I lay on the side of the pavement, and I wept. Wiping my eyes, I took out my Bible, and looked desperately within it for comfort but when I opened it, though the page was within the Gospel of Luke, the words were from Genesis: "Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me."

Around that passage the writing morphed and swam before my eyes. And wherever there were words that might give me comfort, I found them obscured by dark stains. The bile began to rise within my throat again, and I desperately wanted to hurl the book away from me. I held it, though, for just a moment before I placed the small volume once again in my jacket. It took more willpower than I could have believed, but I kept it. I stood up shakily, and staggered back to the presbytery.

I slept for a long time, and missed morning Mass, saying I was feeling unwell. It wasn't a lie, of course; I just lay there for hours. There seemed a safety in stillness, as though inaction could do no harm. It was the first good decision I had made, and there isn't a

day goes by I don't curse myself for ever rising from that bed. Nobody bothered me – I think word had gotten round that I was having a difficult time and they were almost certainly trying to decide who would be best to talk to me, or even whether to ask the Bishop to intervene.

I decided that I needed to talk to Father Singh. I didn't think that he would be able to help me, but he was at least familiar with Bethany O'Connor's case. Perhaps he might have some insight into what was happening. I tried to find him quickly – the faces on each crucifix and painting I passed seemed to twist and sneer at me as I walked and my head was throbbing. The painted blood glistened as though still wet. I'm glad I didn't encounter anyone, for I was staggering so much they would likely have thought I was drunk.

Finally I found Father Singh in the small chapel. He seemed surprised to see me and as I approached, his face fell and he backed away ever so slightly. I can't imagine how bad I must have looked to get such a reaction from him, but I sat next to him anyway. I began to talk, to tell him everything that had happened. He remained silent as I spoke, until I began to talk about the exorcism I had tried to perform on Bethany. He held up his hand, and asked if I'd prefer to speak about it in confession. I was momentarily confused, and asked him what sin he felt I had committed. He looked at me, and I swear there was almost a smile on his face when he spoke. "Spiritual pride," he said, "that has led to quite a fall."

Unsettled though I was at his attitude, I could not deny that he was

right. I agreed, and we left the chapel. Soon I was giving my account as a full confession, and I could not keep from crying as I described what happened when I attempted to lay a blessing upon that house on Hill Top Road. I finished my account, and waited for Father Singh to speak of my penance or absolution. Instead, he paused for a few moments, then said, “No, your sins are deeper than that.” And he began to list them.

Every transgression I had made since I was six years old. The disabled child I had bullied in primary school, the time I stole money from my mother’s purse to buy cigarettes, the indiscretions I had had at the seminary. All of them. I had confessed them each before and been absolved, but not to Father Singh, and to hear them thrown back in my face as such a stark list of wickedness rattled me deeply. I noticed something else as he spoke: Father Singh only emigrated from Jaipur a decade or so before I met him, and he had always had quite a strong accent, but the voice that spoke now to read my litany of wrongdoing had no trace of it. It was a clipped and crisp RP accent, though in tone it seemed to match that of my friend.

I leapt to my feet and ran from the room, and towards the front door. I needed to get out, to get somewhere I could breathe. In the hallway I ran past two other priests, who looked more worried than ever. One of them was Father Singh.

It was dark when I left the presbytery. I had no idea where I was going or why; I just had the desperate need to be somewhere else. The streets of Oxford should have been full of drunken students at

that time on a Sunday night – at least, I thought it was Sunday – but they were almost deserted. Occasionally, I would see figures standing or walking at the end of the narrow streets, but they were shadowy, silhouetted against what little light there was, and were always gone when I approached. I tried once again to pray but the words died on my tongue. I have never felt despair on the sheer scale I did at that moment.

The streets of Oxford are winding, and speak to the age of the place, but I had lived there for no small amount of time and knew them well. That night, though, it was as though I had never walked them before. I saw roads that I had travelled a hundred times, but they seemed different, my eyes focusing on details I had never before marked, and at each turn I found I did not know where I was going or what place it would take me to. The world I knew had become alien to me, and I simply didn't know what to do.

Finally, I found myself in front of The Oratory on Woodstock Road. The church's large round window shifted as I watched, as though it were a tremendous eye that were turning to focus upon me. The door was open and from within, a warm light spilled out. Even in the depths of my – I suppose you could call it mania – there was something comforting about that light. A man appeared at the door. He was tall and pale, and dressed as an altar server.

I walked up to him. My vision was blurred, though I could not tell you whether it was my state of mind at the time or simply that I was crying. I should have known that something was wrong. I did know that something was wrong, but it didn't matter. I had no fight

left within me, so when he told me that it was time for Mass, I simply nodded and followed.

He led me through the church. It was bright, so bright. Candles covered every surface, each glowing so powerfully that I could barely look directly at them. The layout was how I remembered, but the pews were all empty, and I could see none of the statues or crosses that I expected. The man led me unresisting into the vestry, where I found my cassock and stole laid out in front of me. The stole was not green as I would have expected for a normal Sunday mass, nor was it violet or red or any other liturgical colour. Instead it was a pale, sickly yellow. I felt the eyes of the altar server upon my back, and dressed quickly.

At that moment, the bell rang to mark the start of the mass. It was a single, jarring tone that cut through the air and made me almost double over in pain, so badly did it pierce into my pounding skull. I regained myself, gripping the thin, bony arm of the altar server, and walked out into the church. The pews were full now. Row upon row of people, far more than had ever before attended a mass that I had said. Each was dressed in black from head to toe, and their skin was fevered, jaundiced yellow. The eyes of every man, woman and child stared blankly forward, and their mouths hung open, wide and smiling, like their jaws had locked in silent rictus.

I could have left. I know that now. I know that my will and my actions were my own, and even at the time I knew that what I was seeing was so wrong. So very wrong but… it didn't feel like at the time I could have made any other choice. Even in that strange

place, stared at by hellish parishioners I must have known weren't really there. G-… Forgive me, even then, I thought to find some comfort in the liturgy. The odd-smelling incense swirled about me from the altar server's brazier, and my head swam with a scent that felt so familiar, yet so foreign.

Finally, I stood before the altar and began the mass. I was surprised as I spoke, and the holy names slipped from my mouth without hesitation, but the congregation I addressed were quiet, and each pause for a response was met with only that oppressive, wide-mouthed silence, a jarring void that tightened the fear I felt gripping my soul. When the Liturgy of the Word began, I watched in silent dread as the altar server stepped to the pulpit to deliver the first reading. He stood there, dark eyes scanning the open bible, before he raised his head and looked up as though to speak, but all that came from his throat was the single tolling sound of that bell, and my head pulsed in pain. The same thing happened for the second reading, that long, drawn out chime.

Then came the reading of the Gospel. I walked to the pulpit myself, and saw the passage indicated was Mark, chapter 9, verses 14-19. I began to try and read it, but my voice was gone and from my own mouth came the sound of that bell. I fell to the floor, but no-one moved to help me.

Eventually, I was able to stand again, and a dull panic began to rise within me as I realised that next came the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The thought of these people, these things, taking the body of J- taking the sacrament of Holy Communion felt like the direst of

blasphemies. I didn't stop, though. I didn't know what else to do, and my mind was swimming with the sound of the bell and the collective horror of all the things that I had seen and felt.

The altar server brought me the communion wafers and the wine, and I took them. My hands felt strange and clammy as I held them, but I brought them to the altar and began to speak. This time my words came out crisp and clear, and as I said them I noticed fewer and fewer of the parishioners seemed to be in the pews. Hope began to rise within me, as it seemed the words would work to banish these jaundiced watchers, and I pressed on. Finally, the pews were empty, and my heart soared as I turned towards the tabernacle to retrieve the rest of the Host.

It was strange, the rich cloth curtain that covered that ornate metal box seemed stuck, so I pulled and pulled and eventually it came free. I opened the door and retrieved the Host, returning it to the altar. Then I… I lifted it to my mouth, and I ate. It did not taste as I expected.

I'm sure you've guessed the reality of what it was I was eating. I don't even know where I was, some dingy basement, from what it seemed when the light fell from my eyes and I returned to reality. At least, I assume this is reality. I dream, sometimes, that perhaps this is the illusion – my arrest and imprisonment merely a hallucination. That I'm not a murdering cannibal.

It doesn't matter. At that moment, seeing those bound corpses before me, I made the decision to take no action ever again. I will

not commit the further sin of ending my life, but I sat there until the police came. I pled guilty to all the charges they laid before me, and now here I am, doubting everything I see and hear. I do worry about the state of my soul, of course, but there is little to be done. My old colleagues have come by on occasion, and even the Bishop once, but it doesn't help. Whatever they may be actually be saying, all I can hear is the sound of the bell.

Thank you for your time.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

As it turns out the second part of this statement was simply misfiled in the next folder, which was useful, although it does beg the question of who was reading it last? Martin is still absent, but Tim and Sasha both swear they haven't seen it before. Was my predecessor reading it at some point? That seems unlikely given the state of the place; I find it hard to credit the idea that Gertrude Robinson actually read any of these files. Still, it's hardly our biggest concern.

It's difficult to know where to begin with a statement like this. If the person giving their testimony is unable to distinguish the real and the unreal, that doesn't usually bode well for anyone trying to find evidence. Let us begin with Bethany O'Connor. From what Sasha could find in the records of St Hugh's College, she was indeed a student with them, studying archaeology, matriculating in 2008.

Everything Father Burroughs says about her faith, her hospitalisation and her death appears to match up with official records. However, college records appear to list her as one of the students living in halls during her second year, rather than in an off-campus house, and it was a porter who she attacked with a kitchen knife, rather than a housemate. In fact, according to the letting agent, there was no-one living at 89 Bullingdon Road that year, so whatever Bethany was doing in that house, it wasn't living there legally.

Father Burroughs' old colleagues from the Church certainly remember his falling apart following the failed exorcism. They were apparently in the process of talking to the Bishop to get him some help when the 'culminating incident' occurred that led to his incarceration. Prior to meeting Bethany O'Connor, none of them had anything but the highest praise for the man.

As for the incident itself, Father Burroughs was found in one of the back rooms of 89 Bullingdon Road. He was wearing a butcher's apron and sat in front of two students, Christopher Bilham and James Mann. They were both tied to chairs and quite dead. Cause of death was listed as blood loss from multiple lacerations all over their legs and torso, as well as removal of both their faces with a sharp blade, possibly a scalpel. The face of James Mann was found to have been partially eaten by Father Burroughs. He pled guilty to all charges brought before him and is currently serving two life sentences at Wakefield Prison, though HMPS refused our request for a follow-up interview.

What interests me is the paralleling of Father Burroughs' climactic hallucination with reality, and the fact that at no point did he perform any actions that might be analogous with the binding and actual murder of the students. Also, it strikes me that the altar server he described seems out of place with most of his other delusions, in that he appeared to have active agency, which is uncharacteristic for these visions the priest describes. Finally, there is the small detail mentioned in the police report that none of the tools used to kill or mutilate the victims were found at the scene. This all leads me to believe that there may have been a second person there that night, although from talking with the police, I get the impression that there is little appetite for re-opening the case, considering how successful the initial prosecution was.

There's one other detail Tim uncovered that sticks out to me. It's a name I recognise, though I have no idea what it could mean. The Oratory was obviously not the actual scene of Father Burroughs' crimes, but there was one strange thing that happened a few days prior. They received delivery of a pale yellow stole, which apparently vanished less than a day after they signed for it. This would be unusual, but not necessarily noteworthy, if it wasn't for fact that one of the deacons recalled the package was handed to them by a company called Breekon and Hope Deliveries.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG021 – Freefall

Statement #0022010

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Moira Kelly, regarding the disappearance of her son Robert. Original statement given October 20th, 2002. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

You must forgive me if it takes a while to get this all down on paper. I'm not a fast writer and what I saw is… It's all very well to say "write down what you saw", but what if you don't have the words? What I saw doesn't make any sense, and it makes my head hurt awfully when I try to remember it well enough to describe.

Am I mad? What happened is mad. It can't have happened. But it did. It took my Robert, and… now I can't even think of how to put it down in a way that explains it. Maybe somewhere in your library are the words that explain what happened, what I saw, but I haven't read your books, and knowing wouldn't bring him back. I suppose

I'll just have to try.

My son, Robert, was always an adventurous boy. Even when he was a child he'd be running off and getting into scrapes every chance he got. We were living out in the country back then, Althorpe, a little village in Lincolnshire, and every chance he got Robert would be out in the woods with his friends, climbing trees and exploring deep into the forests. He had a few other children who would join him, but he always climbed higher than they did, always pushed further. I can't even remember all the times he almost got himself lost out there when he was growing up.

As he got older, his interests changed, but that sense of danger never left him. I used to have to drive him half an hour every Wednesday, because that was the closest leisure centre with a climbing wall, and he was obsessed with reaching the top. After he went away to university, he'd come home every holiday with some new dangerous sport he'd taken up: wakeboarding, mountain-biking. He almost missed his father's funeral because he was away on a scuba-diving trip to Cyprus, and only just managed to book a last minute flight home. It wasn't his fault, of course, Stephen's death came as a shock to us all; what I mean to say is… I wasn't at all surprised when he told me a few years ago that he'd gotten very involved in skydiving.

It had started as a charity thing. His last year at Yarmouth he decided to do a skydive for a charity he'd been volunteering with. I went along to support him when he did it, and when he touched down, I could see it in his eyes, even before he'd removed his

parachute, that he was in love. Since then, it was rare that a month went by without him throwing himself out of a plane, to the point where I wondered where he was getting the money, as from what I hear it's not a cheap hobby, and he certainly wasn't getting much from me.

Shortly after Robert graduated, he came to visit. He was the happiest I'd seen him since his father passed away, and when I asked him about it, he said he'd got a job with a company that ran skydiving all over the country. They were called Open Skydiving, and, his face was beaming when he said this, he was now a fully qualified skydiving instructor. I was happy for him of course, even though every time he described jumping it sounded quite dreadful to me. I had always made it clear that he was never going to get me up there, plummeting through the sky.

After that, I didn't see him much. He was home for Christmas and Mother's Day, if I was lucky, but aside from that, it was the occasional phone call, or even a postcard if he was running a dive at somewhere far away. I have a small stack of them back home, all I really have to remember him by. I remember he sent me one from Aberystwyth, of all places, not too far back, and he signed it "with love from your freefalling son". I used to really like that, but now the phrase just makes shudder.

He was happy, though. He was doing what he loved. I try to hold on to that. There was no way for me to know that anything was wrong. I mean, nothing was wrong. I'm sure of it. Not until that last time.

He came to see me three months ago. I was surprised, as June is the height of the season and his last phone call had seemed to say that he was expecting to be busy right up until winter arrived. Still, here he was, standing on the doorstep and he looked to be in an awful state. He had deep bags under his eyes and it didn't look as though he'd washed in some time. Before he'd said anything I took him inside, sat him down and started to run a hot bath. Whatever had happened, I told him, could wait until he'd gotten himself together. I think I had the right of it, as once he had cleaned himself up and had some hot food he seemed a lot more himself than he had been. Still, he spent a good ten minutes just sat there, staring into space.

I asked him what the matter was, whether he'd had an accident or lost his job or something. When I said that, he laughed an odd sort of laugh and said that he had lost his job. He'd quit, he said. I asked him why, after all he had always loved the whole business of skydiving, but as I said the word 'sky' I saw him flinch back like I had slapped him. So I quieted down and asked him to tell me what had happened.

They'd been running a dive up near Doncaster, he said. Some 85-year-old doing a tandem jump for charity in memory of his wife. He hadn't been the one actually doing the jump with the old man, but it was a significant enough thing that his colleague had asked him to come up as well for support. He'd be coming down alone on a solo parachute. It all started well enough, the flight up was fine, and the old man, who said his name was Simon, appeared to be having a great time, making jokes, and quite frankly a lot more

eager to throw himself out of a plane than almost anyone Robert had ever met before.

Finally the climb finished, and the door was opened to the rush of air. Harriet Fairchild, the instructor, readied herself to jump, with Simon strapped to her chest. It was at this moment, Robert said, that the old man turned to him, shouting something. He didn't hear it clearly, but thought it had been "enjoy sky blue". He'd felt dizzy all of a sudden, almost falling to the floor as Harriet hurled herself and her passenger out of the plane. It passed in a moment, though, and he pushed himself out of the door, and was greeted by that familiar plunging feeling in his stomach as he began his freefall.

He knew something was wrong almost immediately. He was jumping, he said, from about ten thousand feet, so should have been falling for almost thirty seconds before opening his parachute, but he was having trouble keeping count. The clear blue sky was so bright it seemed to blind him, and the numbers were all jumbled in his head. His balance seemed to be all turned around and he said he had had to shut his eyes tight against the brightness, concentrating to keep his count. Finally, he reached what he thought was thirty seconds, and went to pull his ripcord, but as he did, he said, he opened his eyes again and froze. The ground was gone.

I asked him what he meant, had he got turned around, maybe. He just shook his head, and told me again that the ground had gone. All that there was, he said, was that vast, empty blue sky, stretching off before him, but still he was falling into it. It was bright, he kept saying, it was so bright, although there was no sun in that sky and

no clouds for it to hide behind. Just the empty, blue sky in all directions as he fell into it. He wanted to pull the ripcord, to unfurl his parachute, but his hand wouldn't close over the grip. So he just fell.

Robert was shaking badly at this point, so I got him a blanket and made him another cup of tea. I wasn't sure I believed all what he was saying, but he'd certainly been through something dreadful; I could see that. I asked him how long he'd been falling like that, and he said he didn't know. His watch had stopped, but it had felt like hours. Days even. He had been so hungry, he said, but had just kept falling. He didn't know which direction; there was just that empty sky all around, so it was impossible to tell.

Finally, he said, he saw the ground again. It didn't feel like a change or a sudden difference, he just closed his eyes as he had so often in that place, and when he opened them it was there, green and sprawling and rushing up towards him. He'd been so relieved he'd almost forgotten to deploy his parachute. He did, though, and landed safely near the target area.

He was greeted by Harriet, who was surprised by how long it had taken him to get down. She told him it was almost fifteen minutes after when he should have hit the ground, and Simon, this old man, and his supporters had already left. It was obvious something was wrong, and Harriet asked Robert if he was alright. He repeated, "fifteen minutes, just fifteen", and she told him "yes, what had been the problem?" Robert quit right there and then, and it was shortly after that he came to see me.

Now, obviously, I was a bit speechless at my son's tale. It's hard to say how much of it I thought to be true. I didn't think he would ever have lied to me about something like this, but at the same time the sort of thing he described, well, I didn't think it sounded like something from a healthy mind. Let's just say I was thinking the sort of thing… you'll be thinking in a few minutes. Point is, I tried to talk him through his problems and his feelings, but the more he talked about it, the more agitated he became, until at last I decided that we weren't getting anywhere, and I got his old room ready for him. He slept soundly that night, as far as I remember.

The next morning was a beautiful day. The sun was streaming through the window, and the air was warm and still, without it being as hot as it had been the week before. When Robert finally woke up, I suggested that we go for a short walk to enjoy the day, and hopefully clear out any of that fear he felt that was still hovering about. He didn't seem to want to go, at first, he kept glancing at the cloudless sky, but I promised him a picnic lunch and that seemed to convince him.

That last hour was one of the happiest I'd ever spent with my son. In the sunlight, the bags under his eyes seemed to disappear, and after a few minutes he even stopped glancing at the sky all the time. We walked along, sometimes talking, sometimes silent, and the world seemed to be alright.

There's a hill near where I live. It's a gentle, grassy slope but goes up quite high. You can see it from the kitchen window of my house. That's one of the reasons I'm moving. It was that hill we were

climbing when it happened. We had just reached the top, when Robert turned and to me with a sudden look of utter terror on his face. I asked him what was wrong; he just screamed and pushed me away. I fell hard onto the ground, and could do nothing but watch as my son ran off up the hill.

And then… And then… This is the part I can't put into words. I'm going to try, but whatever you think of when you read this is not going to be what happened; it will just be the closest I can describe before thinking about it too much gives me a migraine. The closest I can say is this: the sky ate him.

He didn't fall, or fly, or take-off. There wasn't anything in the sky that took him. It wasn't a hand that reached out and grabbed him, it was the sky itself, the whole sky, as far as the horizon I could see, that twisted around and moved like… like the shifting of sand. It ate Robert. That's the only way I can describe it. Please don't make me do so again.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Before I address the central point of this statement, namely the question of… whether the sky can eat people, there are a few other facts that need to be addressed. Firstly, the company that Ms. Kelly states Robert worked for, Open Skydiving, does not exist, and as far as Sasha's research can determine, never has. It appears in no company register and has no entries within any of the bodies that

deal with the immense number of licences a skydiving business would require. There were one or two news articles from late 2000 that reference events by Open Skydiving, or sometimes the Open Skydiving School, but whatever they were, they were not an officially licensed business, so either they were lying to Robert Kelly, or he was lying to his mother.

Not a lot of detail was given about the skydive where Robert Kelly claims to have been transported to an endless sky blue nothing, but Tim really outdid himself here, and after spending almost a day combing through accident and incident reports for the Doncaster area in June 2002, found one that seems relevant. On the 3rd of June 2002, Joseph Puce reported hearing an impact in the field adjoining his house. Upon investigation, he found a parachute had hit the ground at high speed, partially burying itself in the earth. There was no sign of any body, or anyone who might have been wearing it, nor did it have any logo or label, and in Tim's follow-up interview, Mr. Puce vehemently denied there being any planes or skydiving taking place anywhere near his property. The parachute was unopened.

According to police reports, Ms. Kelly attempted to report Robert missing on 7th of June, but it proved difficult, due to an absence of any information on friends or residences. In fact, for the four years prior, it's hard to find any evidence for Robert Kelly's existence at all. It may just be that he moved around a lot, but it feels like more than that. Ms. Kelly declined our request for a follow-up interview, saying she had no desire to revisit the incident.

One other thing bothers me. If Ms. Kelly's recollections are correct, regarding how Robert described his last skydive, Harriet Fairchild the instructor and an old man named Simon. It might just be a coincidence, but I recall the name 'Simon Fairchild' was one of the ones used by –

[DOOR OPENS, CHAIR TUMBLES]

My god! Martin?!

[SOMETHING SQUELCHES]

What… What the hell is – ? What are these things?!

[CLICK]

MAG022 – Colony

Statement #0161203

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Martin, are you sure about this?

MARTIN

I just want to make a statement about what happened to me. I mean, it… it's what we do.

ARCHIVIST

No, what we do is research statements. Usually those made by liars and the mentally unwell.

MARTIN

Well, I need to tell someone what happened, and you can vouch for the soundness of my mind, can't you?

ARCHIVIST

…

That is beside the point.

MARTIN

If you're that worried about it, it doesn't need to be an **official** statement. I just need a record of it.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. You're right. I suppose. Statement of Martin Blackwood, archival assistant at the Magnus Institute, London, regarding…

MARTIN

A close encounter with something I believe to have once been Jane… Prentiss.

ARCHIVIST

Recorded direct from subject, 12th March, 2016.

Statement begins.

MARTIN

Well, a couple of weeks ago, you were looking into that statement about the spider that wouldn't go away. Carlos… Vittery I think his name was? I knew there was something not right about the whole thing from the off. I said it probably wasn't natural, him dying and being encased in web when he was found, and I stand by that, though it wasn't anything to do with spiders that ended up after me. Almost wish it had been. *[Nervous laugh]* I like spiders. Big ones, at least. Y'know, y'know the ones you can see some fur on; I actually think they're sort of cute –

ARCHIVIST

Please stick to the statement, Martin.

MARTIN

Right. You asked me to investigate that flat that he lived in down in Boothby Road, and that's what I do. I take the Northern Line up to Archway and walk the rest of the way down there. It's still quite early then, and I find the building easily enough. It looks just like Mr. Vittery said it did in his statement, and there's a big thick door on the front, that looks like it leads into the hall and then to the flats. Obviously it's locked so I try the buzzers, but nobody's answering and I figure they're probably all out at work. I didn't want to come back to you without due diligence, though – I've learned that lesson – so I have a look around the place to see if there's another way I could go in and have a poke around. Sure enough, as I walk round, I spy a basement window that's slightly ajar. It isn't much, but I reckon I can squeeze through it if I try.

As I get… closer, though, I notice there's something on the ground, nearby. The sunlight catches on it and at first I think it must be a screw or a little piece of metal that someone's thrown away. I get closer and I see that it looks more like a worm of some sort. It's maybe an inch long, with a silver segmented body that goes black at one end, almost like it's been burned. It's very… still, so I kneel down to have a look and as I get closer it begins to twitch. Its darkened head twists towards me and it starts to… writhe in this kind of eerie way, moving along the ground very fast and straight at

me. Well, to be honest I… I freaked out a bit. I leapt to my feet and I just stamped on it before I had a chance to really think about what I was doing. I felt it pop beneath my shoe with a faint cracking sound, like stepping on an eggshell, and a thick, black slime started to ooze from where I stepped on it.

Now, obviously I was pretty disgusted by the whole thing, so I take a moment to scrape off what's left of it and check around for any more. There's none that I can see, so after composing myself for a couple of seconds, I continue on my way into the basement. The window was small. Quite a tight squeeze for me, I mean, I'm not exactly the smallest guy in the world, I know, and it's only once I'm inside that I realise it's only at ground level for the outside, so I take a bit of a tumble onto the basement floor. Luckily I get away without hurting myself and start to have a quick look around the room. It's pretty big, and it looks like it goes under pretty much the whole building, but the light from the window doesn't get very far inside so most of the place was very dark.

Then I realise that I don't have any sort of torch with me, and I can't see any light switch on the nearby wall, so I've no real way of looking round. I almost decided to turn around and try to climb out back the way I came, not least because the place had a really bad 'feeling' to it. Like, like there was this musty smell, and the air was dusty and thick. Also, you're going to think I'm an idiot when I say this, but I didn't like the way my… shadow moved. The light from the window behind me cast it pretty clearly on the floor, and looking at it I swear the edges seemed to move. It was like a… like

a, like an undulation, like, like they were being shifted **by** something. I mean… look, I know you hate the word, but it was really… **spooky.**

Look, anyway, that was when I saw the bottom of the stairs leading up, and I, I didn't waste any time heading up them. The door at the top wasn't locked, so I find myself in the ground floor hall of the building and I'll admit it was a real relief to get out of that place and into the well-lit main building.

I could have left at that point, probably should have, but I decided to try one more time to see if I could talk to the current occupants of Mr. Vittery's old flat. Due diligence… and all that. So I, I head up to number four and give a few knocks on the door.

I didn't expect anyone to be in, but the door's opened by an old woman in a headscarf. I tried to ask her some questions, but it became clear she didn't really speak much in the way of English. After a few seconds she just shook her head and pointed behind me, closing the door unceremoniously. Turning around, I see a large, dark-skinned man in a very nice-looking suit eyeing me with a bit of suspicion. He introduced himself as Yasir Kundi, and said he owned the building, and became slightly more co-operative after I lied to him and told him that one of the upstairs residents had buzzed me in.

I told him why I was there, although obviously I didn't mention… breaking in or the Institute or what we do because I find people often don't understand or respect that out in the real world. I just

said that following Mr. Vittery's death I was looking into some aspects of his history and did he remember anything about the time he was a tenant? Mr. Kundi was about as helpful as you might expect. Told me Carlos Vittery had lived there, seemed weird, always shut himself up, but was never a problem, paid his rent on time. Used to have a cat, but it now lived with the Sanderson couple in number two. He seemed genuinely surprised to hear about the death, but wasn't able to shed any sort of light on it.

It wasn't a lot, really. Still, about as much as I might have expected, so I headed back to the Institute and updated you on what I'd found. And, well, as I'm sure you're aware that was the last time I saw you before I disappeared.

I was heading home when I got to thinking, and I was worried I hadn't really done enough investigation for you, since I got so freaked out by the basement and all. And then I remembered that I'd seen quite a lot of spider webs in the brief time I was down there, and maybe I should check it out again. I mean, like I said, I'm not really afraid of spiders. So… I went back for another look.

It was dark when I got to Boothby Road, but I saw that the basement window was still open. I'd made sure to bring a torch this time, and after a quick check to make sure nobody was watching, I climbed inside. I knew right then that I'd made a **huge**… mistake. The air was just as musty as it had been before, but it seemed warmer than it had been, which was strange because outside it was a cold February night. I turned on my torch and shone it around, but was disappointed to see that all those spider webs that I

remembered seemed old and unremarkable. If there were spiders there, none were easily seen, and… for a second I thought that the only interesting part of my return trip was that it would land me in prison if I wasn't careful. Then, I heard movement. From the other side of the basement.

It was… faint, just a rustling, really. I didn't want to check it out, I really didn't. I've catalogued and looked into enough of these cases to know that following the noise is always a really, really bad idea, but… I mean… it's my job, isn't it? So, I slowly moved towards it, keeping my torch held in front of me like a… like a shield. The beam was so much weaker than I had thought it was, and it only lit up the stark outlines of the shelves and detritus that littered the basement. The movement had stopped, or at least I couldn't hear it anymore, and I'd almost made up my mind to just turn around and leave, when my torch fell across what looked like a human figure.

It appeared to be… a woman. She was facing away from me, apparently staring at the corner of the wall. Her hair was long and black, though it was so twisted and dirty it was hard to tell if that was its original colour. She wore a threadbare grey overcoat, though beneath it her legs were bare, and covered with what I at first I thought were spots. In her right hand she held a stained, green handkerchief. She stood there, totally still, either not noticing the torchlight that was shining on her, or not caring. I didn't move a muscle.

Then, with a quick, jerky movement she brought the handkerchief to her face and coughed. I mean, I call it a cough, because that's

what it looked like, but it didn't **sound** like a cough. It was more like… like… you know in a nature documentary, w-when the lion's caught something and it's, it's ripping it apart? That noise of wet meat…? Yeah, it was, was like that. I saw something drop from the handkerchief onto the floor. It was about an inch long, silver, and it wriggled as it fell.

I screamed. I'm not ashamed to admit it, though looking back I really wish I hadn't. Her head snapped towards me and she locked eyes with me. Her pupils seemed ragged and collapsed, and when she smiled her teeth were chipped and blackened. I started to stagger backwards, expecting at any moment for her to lunge at me, but instead she slowly reached up and… let the overcoat fall to the floor.

Her skin was pale, almost grey, and full of… sorry, it still makes me sick to think about it. It was full of holes. Deep, black holes just honeycombing every bit of flesh like a… wasps' nest. I could see those… thin, silver worms crawling in and out, and their black tips twitching as they squirmed through that… pitted… meat. I mean, it wasn't human. It **can't** have been. Sh-She… **It** took a step towards me and as it did so the worms began to writhe out of every hole and cavity, falling to the floor in a cascading… wave and starting to crawl towards me with… with alarming speed.

I had the oddest thought, then, and even as I backed away towards the stairs, I started to get my phone out. The daft thing is I wasn't even going to call anyone for help, I just wanted to take a picture of the thing. To prove to **you** that it happened – you're always so

quick to dismiss these statements and I wanted proof for you. Except, well, I managed to drop it, of course. Just as I was bringing up the camera app, one of the worm-things reached at me and leapt at my face. That thing jumped literally 6 feet through the air at my face. It missed me, but I was so taken aback that I fell onto the stairs behind me, and dropped my phone to the ground. I-I didn't stop to pick it up, I just fled up the stairs as fast as I could.

Obviously the door at the top wasn't locked. If it had been… I'm sure I'd be dead. Or… worse. I ran faster than I ever have in my life – I've never been good at running – and every moment expected to feel something wriggling up my leg. I didn't stop running until I was sat in the Underground and had checked every inch of my seat for worms. I live in Stockwell, right at the other end of the Northern Line, so by the time I got home I was… starting to feel a bit safer… though utterly exhausted. I knew that there was no way I was going to be able to work the next day, but without my phone, I couldn't let you know. I mean, I don't have a landline – who does anymore – but couldn't bring myself to stay awake long enough to send an email, so I just collapsed, fully clothed onto the bed.

I don't know how long I slept for, but it was still dark when the knocking woke me up. I don't know if it was the same night, or if I'd slept right through the day. Either way, I dragged myself up and, as I sat there, it all came back to me, what I'd seen, and I shuddered. I tried to tell myself I'd imagined it. Maybe I'd overreacted to finding a homeless woman sleeping in the basement. Maybe she was sick and needed an ambulance. Oh god, maybe I'd

left her to die.

There was more knocking, and I reached up to flick the light on. But when I did so nothing happened. I tried the lamp next to my bed, but again, nothing. Looking around I saw that none of my electronics seemed to be on. There must have been some sort of power cut. Again, someone knocked at the door. Maybe it was one of my neighbours… coming to check whether I'd lost power? So I shuffle over towards the door and… reached for the handle.

As I was about to open it I got a sudden chill and stopped. What if **she** was outside, waiting? I mean th-the worms that made a hive of her body, eager, striving to make me one as well. I thought of that awful case you had us looking into where that woman… burst into worms, and I realised that this woman must be **that** Jane Prentiss you were telling us about. I never had one of those peepholes added, so I couldn't see what was out there, but as I took a step back I saw something on the floor, crawling out from underneath the door. It was a small, silver-looking worm.

I think I might have… lost my mind a bit, then. It all… feels very… strange, blurry. I-I remember stamping and stamping as-as more made their way under my doorway. I-I remember grabbing every towel, sock, bit of fabric scrap that I could find, stuffing them under the door, into the cracks around the window. **Anything** where a slender worm might crawl I made airtight. And then I sat there and waited. I-I still had no power, no phone, no way to communicate with the outside.

This went on for **thirteen** days. Every time I thought it might be safe to try and leave I'd hear that knocking at my door come back. Luckily there was no problem with my water supply, so I had plenty to drink. I'm just glad none of them thought to come up through the pipes. I eat a lot of… ready meals, cans, that kind of thing, so… I had food, although after the first few days I had to start rationing.

If I ever see another can of peaches… *[shudders]*

But… I-I think the worst part was the boredom. No internet, no phone, no power. I read the handful of print books I own several times. I-I didn't really sleep. Every time I closed my eyes I'd start to feel something was crawling… up my legs and I'd have to sit up and check. Other times I'd be awoken by that knocking. I spent a lot of time trying to remember what you told me about Jane Prentiss when we were working on Tim Hodge's statement, but… all I remembered were that she called herself to be a practising witch and was believed to be infected by a-a dangerous, unknown parasite.

She never talked to me. I-I could have heard her clearly through the door, but she never made a sound apart from that knocking. From what I saw, maybe what was in her throat didn't leave room for a voice. Strangely, she never tried to break down my door, either. Just knocked. She knocked… and knocked… and knocked.

Finally, I woke up this morning and she was gone. I don't know **exactly** how I knew. I-I think she brought that musty smell with her, and this morning I-I couldn't smell it. And there was no

knocking. I mean, it still took me about four hours of checking and double-checking and listening at the letterbox before I got the nerve to actually open the door, but when I did… there was no-one there. And I ran… all the way here.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

You're sure about all of this, Martin?

MARTIN

Look, I'm not going to lie to you about something like this, John. I… like my job. Most of the time.

ARCHIVIST

Very well. In which case there's a room in the Archives I use to sleep when working late. I suggest you stay there for now. I'll talk to Elias about whether we can get extra security, but the Archives have enough locks for now. It's also supposed to be humidity controlled and, though it hasn't been working for some time, it does mean it's well-sealed. Nothing will be sneaking through any window cracks.

MARTIN

[Confused & flustered] Okay… thanks. To be honest I didn't, didn't expect you… to take it seriously.

ARCHIVIST

You say you lost your phone two weeks ago?

MARTIN

Thereabouts. When I went back to the basement.

ARCHIVIST

Well, in that time I have received several text messages from your phone, saying you were ill with stomach problems. The last one said that you thought it “might be a parasite”, though my calls trying to follow up were never answered. So, if this does involve Jane Prentiss, then I take it deadly seri–

[PHONE BUZZES]

Hang on.

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

I just received another text message. From you. “Keep him. We have had our fun. He will want to see it when the Archivist’s crimson fate arrives.”

MARTIN

What does that mean?

ARCHIVIST

It means I ask Elias to hire some extra security. I should probably warn Sasha and Tim as well. I'll also have a look through the Archives, as I believe we should have a statement from Ms. Prentiss herself in here somewhere.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG023 - Schwartzwald

Statement #8163103

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Albrecht von Closen, regarding a discovered tomb near his estate in the Black Forest. Original statement given as part of a letter to Jonah Magnus, March 31st, 1816. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

My dearest Jonah,

Forgive my writing you this letter so soon after the last. You must think me dreadful for not even giving you a chance at a reply, but I recall that during your visit last spring you mentioned your fascination with the macabre and strange, and pressed upon me as to whether there were any such lore or legends that I myself were familiar with. Wolfgang writes me that you are acquiring quite the collection, and I feel that I now have something that belongs with it, far more than any of the fairy stories or old maids' tales that I told you before. Put quite simply, I have had a most terrifying

encounter. Two encounters, really, I suppose, and I pray to the Lord that I shall have no more. For I honestly believe I should die, from fear if not from violence, were I forced to meet the thing again.

I'm sure you must think me the most dreadful bore, speaking around the thing so, but I feel that to understand all I must begin my tale some time before the apparition itself appeared, with my travels down to Württemberg. My family has a small estate there, in the heart of the Schwarzwald, what you would call the Black Forest, near a small town by the name of Schramberg. This estate belonged to my brother, Henrik, and when he passed away it descended to my nephew Wilhelm. He was barely in his fourteenth year when Henrik died, and his mother had passed while birthing him, so myself and Clara have since made every effort to provide him with guidance and such affection as he may have lost. This felt especially keen, as we have ourselves been unable to conceive a child, and so we felt it our duty to teach Wilhelm what we would have impressed upon a son of our own. The profligacy of youth is always a danger, and we felt it our duty to help guide him, where we could, along the path of virtue. We needn't have worried ourselves overly: I have never met so sober and prudent a soul as seems to exist within young Wilhelm. Nonetheless, because of this we have remained close with my nephew through the years, despite the distance. When he took ill this last winter, naturally we made arrangements to travel to his home in the Schwarzwald and offer what comfort we could.

The journey was difficult, as I suppose is to be expected when

travelling in winter, but Wilhelm's condition brooked no delays. At first, the worst we had to contend with, coming from Bavaria, was the lack of provision in the inns where we took lodging, as we were told over and over again how rare guests were this time of year. Still, say what you will about the German Confederation – and I know you certainly have a lot of opinions on that, my friend – but it has made travelling a lot quicker and I was certainly grateful for that. When we entered Württemberg, however, our way was much harder. The snow fell thicker in the Schwarzwald, compelling us at last to trade the coach for a sleigh.

You have never known winter in the Black Forest, have you? I know that you will say you have snows and forests in England, but I have seen what you call forests and can tell you that there can be no comparison to the Schwarzwald, its trees covered in a dense canopy of untouched snow. There is such a silence there as I have never encountered anywhere else on earth, with every sound seeming to die the moment it touches that soft white blanket of virgin snow. By day, it is the most beautiful serenity, this calm stillness. But by night, oh my friend, by night it becomes something altogether else. The quiet of the forest, it becomes like the world is holding its breath, waiting to strike, and in those parts where the canopy clears enough that the moon shines down, it casts everything into the most ghostly shades. I lost count of the number of times I swore I saw figures in the shadows, briefly illuminated by the moonlit glow of that frozen land. At one point I even demanded the sleigh be stopped so I could make an examination of the area with a brace of pistols, but of course I found nothing. It was in such a state of mind

that we arrived at Wilhelm's estate near Schramberg.

We were greeted by Wilhelm's servants and told of their master's condition. The doctor had, apparently, braved the roads from Schramberg some few days ago and had given what medicine he could. Since then, the servants told us, he had been steadily improving, but was still very weak. I will confess at this news to feeling slightly unnecessary, but upon entering Wilhelm's chamber, the happiness evident upon his face when he saw Clara and myself put all such thoughts to rest.

Wilhelm was in recovery, but I had no intention of travelling back through that silent, icy stillness unless absolutely necessary, and Clara agreed. We made plans to winter there with Wilhelm. There was room enough for us, though our chamber was more modest than what we would have been accustomed to. I will admit that I didn't entirely relish the thought of staying in the Schwarzwald until the spring thaw, but of the courses of action we had at our disposal, it was the one I found to be the most agreeable.

And so began what was to be lengthy sojourn near Schramberg, and truly have I never wished more keenly that I had been able to bring my library with me. I had but a few books with me and Wilhelm, despite his not-inconsiderable intelligence, had even fewer. In the end, we played a lot of cribbage and listened to Clara play many a tune on the pianoforte. My wife has never had a singular voice, but her skills upon the keys more than make up for it. I myself would often take long walks through the surrounding woods during the early afternoon, when the cold was tolerable. Sometimes I would

make my way the two miles to neighbouring Schramberg, but more often I would simply choose a direction and stroll into the trees for as long as my fancy held me and then simply follow my own trail of footprints back to what was, for the moment, my home.

It was on one of these walks, some months into our stay, that I came upon that ancient graveyard. It must have been sunken slightly into the ground itself, as all I could see of the grave markers themselves were the merest tip of worn and crumbled granite above the snow. I could not guess at the size of the place, as every few seconds, whichever way I walked, I would spot another small bud of memorial stone blossoming through the frosted earth. I dug some snow from in front of one of the headstones – it had a broken angel atop it, both wings snapped and fallen – but the inscription was far too worn to make out any of the words. I had all but made up my mind to leave, as I knew I had little over an hour before the light began to fail me. As I turned to do so, however, I spied something not far removed among the trees, far larger and more intriguing than the graves I had found thus far.

It stood about five feet proud above the snow, and the stone was far better quality than what I had seen so far. A small mausoleum. The door, once a sturdy iron grate, had long since rusted off of its hinges, leaving only a gaping black aperture that seemed to lead deeper than the dimensions of the mausoleum would allow. Over the top, barely readable, but still most definitely there, was the name ‘Johann von Württemberg’. I was fascinated – I knew my local history well enough and certainly was not aware of any noble of the

Württemberg line named Johann. I was sure he had never been a count or a prince. More than that, there had never been, as far as I could recall, any town or settlement near this spot that could have supported a cemetery of such size. So who was Johann von Württemberg, and why had he built a mausoleum here, in the middle of the Schwarzwald, six miles or more from Schramberg?

I had no time to investigate any further, for I realised that I needed to leave immediately if I was to return to my wife and nephew before sundown. I turned away and followed my path back as quickly as I dared. While I would normally be satisfied forging a new path the next day, something in the thought of that silent tomb drew me back, and I found myself marking trees with my pocket knife, to make my finding my way back the following day that much easier.

I asked Wilhelm that evening over dinner whether he had ever heard of Johann von Württemberg, or was aware of the mausoleum a few north miles from his home. He told me no to both – he rarely spent time in the forest around save for hunting, and the hunting was usually poor in the north, as the trees were too close together to easily navigate with a horse. And he had never heard of this 'Johann'. I made some inquiries as to where I could look further into the history of the area, but there was no library of a decent size within near distance of Schramberg, and as I mentioned, Wilhelm had little in the way of books, so I let the matter drop.

Nothing else of note occurred that night, and so, making my apologies the next morning, I headed out early towards the old

cemetery. I made no secret of my destination, and even offered the opportunity to accompany me to both Wilhelm and Carla, but neither saw the trip as worth the cold hours it would take to reach. So it was alone that I once again made my way to that forgotten place. My marking the trees had proven unnecessary, as there had been no fresh snowfall the previous night, and my footprints from the day before were still clear and very easy to follow.

The mausoleum looked exactly as I had left it, its door still yawning, and the sunlight seemed to make it very little distance over the threshold before darkness once again swallowed it. I had foreseen this, and packed a lantern for the purpose of exploring the place. I was about to light it, when I noticed a figure watching me from the treeline. Perhaps this place was not so forgotten after all. I had heard tales of brigands using places such as this for assignations, and was suddenly glad I had also thought to pack a pistol and shot. I approached the man, but he didn't move to flee. As I got closer, I saw him in more detail. He was short and squat, wearing an old-fashioned, black frock coat and knee breeches, though his head was shadowed by a wide-brimmed black hat. By his costume, I assumed him to be an old man, perhaps a groundskeeper for this place, or simply a recluse that lived nearby. When I greeted him, though, the voice that answered held no quiver of age within it. He asked me, in low, peasant German whether I was planning to explore the tomb. I said I was, and asked if he was the keeper of this place. He laughed at that, a sharp, guttural exclamation that surprised me, and told me that the crypt I sought was a dangerous place. I asked him what I had to fear from

the dead, and he stared at me. I could not see his eyes beneath the brim of his hat, but I could still feel his gaze upon me. He laughed again, and told me, “No, sir, you have nothing to fear from the dead.”

At these words I began to back away, ensuring my hand was on my pistol, not taking my eyes off this strange man until I reached the edge of the mausoleum. Only then did I look down to make sure my lantern was where I left it, and when I returned my gaze to the trees, he was gone. To speak plainly, I was rather shaken by my encounter, and considered turning back and trying my luck another day, but something within me balked at having all my work and preparation be for naught because of a single farmer who couldn’t mind his business. I lit my lantern, and –

ARCHIVIST

Martin! Good lord man, if you’re going to be staying in the Archives, at least have the decency to put some trousers on!

MARTIN

Oh god, sorry, sorry! I didn’t think you were in until later; it’s not even seven yet.

ARCHIVIST

I’ve been coming in early in the hopes of leaving this place before dark.

MARTIN

It's been a week and we've seen nothing. Do you really think she's still out there?

ARCHIVIST

I have no idea, but I don't intend to take any chances.

MARTIN

[SIGH] No, I suppose not…

ARCHIVIST

Now, if you'll excuse me.

MARTIN

Righto.

ARCHIVIST

Statement continues.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

At first I was confused, inside appeared to be empty. No monuments or coffins stood inside, and no plaques or sigils adorned the wall. Just a single slab of marble stood in the centre, like an altar. At first I thought that perhaps that was where the coffin should have sat, and someone had simply taken it, but as I walked around I saw what it was concealing. Behind the sharp-angled block was a staircase, descending deep into some unknown subterranean vault.

You will scoff at me, Jonah, when next we meet, I am sure of it. You will laugh at my bravado and call an unthinking adventurer, but the plain fact of it is that I descended those stairs with hardly a qualm. Any fear I may have had was solely focused on the man I had met outside, and I foresaw no danger within the vault itself. So I hoisted my lantern and I descended the stairs.

They were old, of that there is no doubt, but they were not worn, and I would wager that I was the first soul to go down there in at least a century. They descended for some time, until I was quite certain that I was deep within the frozen earth of the Schwarzwald. At last, the steps ended in a short corridor, and I could see the bricks that formed the walls and arched ceiling had crumbled and shifted in places, allowing ingress to the thick roots of the trees above, which coiled and splayed across those parts of the passage in most need of repair. After about a minute of walking, the passage opened out into a large chamber. In the centre stood another block of marble, almost identical to the one I had seen upstairs, but atop this one was a sealed, stone coffin. The name ‘Johann von Württemberg’ was carved here too, though preserved in much clearer detail without the elements to wear it away.

As I gazed at it, I noticed that the walls of the room did not appear to be stone, as the passage or the mausoleum had been. I walked cautiously closer, until my lantern illuminated it clearly. The walls were covered with bookshelves. Packed in with such a density that it was impossible to tell if there was a real wall behind them, or if the books themselves formed the only bulwark against the soil.

They were, unfortunately, terribly rotten. The centuries had not been kind to them, and as I tried to move one of them, I realised that the damp had, over time, caused them to merge into a single mass of paper and bookcloth. Predictable as this may have been, I still felt the most acute pang of loss. To see such a volume of knowledge, possibly unique in all the world, utterly destroyed, was incredibly painful to me. The actual shelves were formed of the same marble as the two blocks, and seemed to have fared better. As I looked at them, I noticed a small engraving, carved at regular intervals along the edge of each one. It was a small eye, open and staring.

For some reason, it was only at that moment that I began to feel afraid. Of what, I couldn't tell you, but those small eyes filled me with a dread that I have trouble describing to you now. Certainly I backed away from the bookshelves, and was all set to depart, when my lantern caught on something in the corner of the room. Or more precisely, two things: the first was a small gold coin that glinted on the floor. The second was a book, perhaps fallen from the shelves long ago. It was in far better condition than the others, perhaps due to where it had lain, and I was able to very carefully open it. I was disappointed to see that it was not written in German, or even French or Latin, but appeared to be in Arabic. It seemed to be an illuminated manuscript of sorts, produced by hand and utterly beautiful, though I could not for the life of me have told you what it concerned.

I took the book and the coin to study later, and hastily left the

vault, the lingering fear making me feel as though some unseen pursuer might come upon me if I hesitated. I drew my pistol as I left the mausoleum, just in case the strange short man from earlier were waiting to accost me, but there was no sign of anyone outside in that clear daylight.

I hurried back, though I still had many hours before dusk. As I went I noticed that the snow on the trees was beginning to thaw, and took comfort in the knowledge that Clara and myself would likely be able to return to Closen soon. Wilhelm was fully recovered from his fever, and by the time I was at dinner, all traces of my earlier fear had disappeared and I was in excellent spirits.

I retired afterwards to smoke a pipe or two and examine my finds at greater length. The book, though beautiful, stubbornly refused to offer up any clues to its contents. With your permission, I'll bring it over for your expert eyes next time I have the pleasure of your company. The coin, on the other hand, was more interesting. On one side, it had an engraved profile of a sharp-faced young man with long, flowing hair. Over the top ran the letters JW, and at the bottom was the number 1279. If this was the date the coin was produced, then I don't need to tell you how exciting a find this might be. The other side was blank, save for three words, very small and worn, but I could just about read them. They read "Für die Stille".

I was about to retire to bed, when one of the serving girls, Hilda – or was it Helga, I forget – asked me for a moment of my time. I obliged and she said had I been asking about the old graveyard out

in the forest? I told yes I had, and she paled ever so slightly. She told me that she never went near the place, that no-one in the town did.

You see, Jonah, apparently there was an old man in Schramberg by the name of Tobias Kohler. He had lived nearly eighty years, and told tales of when he was a child and he and his friends would play a game they called “Johann’s Steps”. It was a game of bravery, where you had to creep down as many steps as you could into the tomb of Johann von Württemberg until you were seen, and then run back out as fast as you could. Tobias would never say who or what you were seen by, and always ignored the question. Well, apparently, the parents of these children found out about this game and one of them, the mother of Tobias’ friend Hans Winkler, decided to put an end to it. She stormed into the cemetery and, seeing Hans entering the mausoleum for his turn, she ran inside after him and down the steps. None of the children saw what happened, but they all heard the scream. They fled back to town, and when they told of what had happened, the town priest, whose name Tobias does not remember, simply nodded and, gathering up six strong, though deeply fearful, men, they headed out toward the cemetery. None of that party ever spoke of what they saw or found there, but Hans went to live with the Becker family out on their small farm. No-one played “Johann’s Steps” again, and the cemetery was once again left deserted.

The only other thing Tobias remembered was that he had once heard a great uncle refer to Johann von Württemberg as “Ulrich’s

bastard", which, if the date on the coin was correct, may be referring to Ulrich I or Ulrich II, but either way that place's history must stretch back almost six hundred years.

But now, I feel I have talked around it long enough. I could fill a dozen more pages with preamble and research, yet none of that is why I have written to you as I have. No, I am writing to you to describe what I saw the last night I stayed at Wilhelm's, the event that led to my and Carla leaving a week earlier than we had planned.

It was three days after I had heard Tobias' story that it happened. I had packed the coin and the book away in a fit of superstition and had decided to take a short stroll as the sun was setting. It was beautiful, the crimsons of the darkening sky danced upon what snow was left, staining it deepest red. I walked around the house, smoking my pipe, until I came upon the tracks I had left when heading towards the old graveyard. As the snow melted it had formed my footprints into packed dirt and ice that almost seemed to glow in the waning daylight. I gazed at them, and froze. I had made two trips to the mausoleum that winter, and sure enough there were two stark sets of footprints heading north. But coming back towards the house, there were three sets of footprints. I felt the presence behind me, and I turned around.

It was the man from the cemetery. His wide brimmed hat was removed and he stared at me. His head was completely bald, and his eyes were missing. They were just empty sockets but they stared at me. They saw me. Believe or dismiss anything else in my letter as

you wish Jonah, but I swear to you that I stood face to face with a man with no eyes and he saw me.

I backed away too quickly and slipped, falling hard upon the ground. In a second he was above me, and he smiled. He said something to me, but my mind was aflame with panic and I didn't hear what it was. He reached towards me slowly, insolently, as though he sought to savour this moment but would not be rushed. Then, quite without warning, he stopped. His head snapped up to stare at something, like a gundog that hears a shot. He stood there, hand poised as though in indecision. And then… And then, he vanished, as though he had never been there, and I simply lay upon the ground, winded and afraid.

Night had fallen by the time I finally pulled myself together enough to run back into the house and begin packing. I told Carla we had to leave as soon as possible, though was vague as to the reasons. I still haven't told her why. How do you tell your wife something like that happened to you?

We took the first coach the following morning and haven't stopped. I didn't even realise the coin was missing until I checked my luggage later. Whether to a light-fingered servant or just my own carelessness, it is gone, so I must apologise that I will not be able to share that particular piece of history with you. I must also apologise for the handwriting; I have been committing this to paper as well as can be done on a long coach-journey. Still, I look forward to showing you the book I have acquired, and the revelations you will no doubt glean from it.

Yours in trust,

Albrecht

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Always a treat to find a piece of history tucked into the wrong section of the archive. Still, I can't say I know much about Jonah Magnus or the origins of the Institute, so this is a rather pleasing discovery in some ways. Obviously there isn't much follow-up to be done here, but to slake my own interest I have done a little bit of digging myself, which I include here for completeness sake.

I've only found one reference to any 'Johann von Württemberg' in any of the German history reference material we have available. Jan Moira's *Cradle of Germany – Württemberg through the Centuries* mentions rumours that Ulrich I, Count of Württemberg had a second son out of wedlock in 1255. No name is listed, but certain enemies of the count were known to spread rumours that this exiled son was "keeping the company of witches". 1279 was also the year that Ulrich I's successor, Ulrich II, died. This may simply have been coincidence, however, as he was succeeded by his half-brother Eberhard I.

Something else I stumbled across, quite by accident, during my research was in *Grim Tales,* H.T. Moncreef's exploration of unexplained and macabre deaths in early 19th century Europe. It mentions a death that took place in Schramberg in 1816. The man,

one Rudolph Ziegler, was found dead at his home on the outskirts of town. What is interesting is that it says he worked in service on an estate nearby. Shortly after his death, one Wilhelm von Closen was investigated for the crime, as it was discovered the dead man had been stealing jewellery from the estate. It was eventually dropped, however, after four doctors attested that the ferocity of the wounds inflicted on Herr Ziegler were, and I quote, “beyond the capability of human violence”. It was ruled an animal attack.

I did try to find out what happened to Albrecht von Closen and his book, but I can find no mention of him in any volume of history, nor anywhere online. Perhaps I might find out more if I spent months sifting through the historical statements in the Archives’ back rooms, but I simply don’t have time to indulge my own curiosity like that.

I have located a genealogy for Wilhelm von Closen, though. He married and had children, and the family remained located in and around Schramberg for almost another century, before one branch emigrated to England in 1908. They had a daughter, Elsa, who went on to marry a man by the name of Michael Keay in 1920. In 1924, they had one daughter, whose name was Mary Keay. This may be simple coincidence, but… it concerns me.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG024 – Strange Music

Statement #0051701

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Leanne Denikin, regarding an antique calliope organ she possessed briefly in August 2004. Original statement given January 17th, 2005. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Let me be clear: I'm not scared of clowns. I don't find them funny, either. Just a bit baffling, really. I've never understood why people would find grown men in stupid make-up and wigs funny. Or scary. It's the same with the dolls. People talk about their cold dead eyes, but they don't seem to have any problem with statues. I suppose now I've got good reason to be scared of both. I just want you to understand, I wasn't seeing things out of fear. This happened.

It didn't come as a surprise when my grandfather died last August. I'd been living with him for almost two years at his home in Bootle, looking after him through his illness. My mother was having her

own difficulties at the time, and my good-for-nothing father wanted nothing to do with any of it, so looking after my grandpa came down to me. It wasn't so bad, really.

My grandpa was a strange man at times. He'd been a carnie for most of his life, working with travelling circuses and freak shows all over Europe, and was something of a recluse in his later years. He could also swear a blue streak a mile wide. Get him behind the keys of a piano, though, and I don't know anyone who could play as beautifully as he could. Like I say, it wasn't a surprise when he finally died, but I still found it difficult. As you may have guessed, I don't have a great relationship with my parents, and have always had some problems making friends, so… when he went, it hit me hard.

I didn't go out that week. Or the next. I saw Joshua, my… partner, I suppose you'd have called him, but aside from that, I didn't see anybody between grandpa's death and the funeral. It was just me, Josh and my mother. Grandpa had never been a churchgoer, but my mother had a lot of faith, so paid for a Methodist funeral, such as it was. It was a hot, muggy day, and I remember wondering whether the stinging in my eyes was from the tears or the sweat. As it turned out, grandpa had left me his house. It didn't really sink in for a while – the house had been the most home I'd had for so long that I'd always felt it was mine in some ways.

Going through my grandpa's old papers and possessions was harder than I had expected. It was only reading some of his own letters that I discovered his birth name was Nikolai – he'd always just gone

by Nick. Eventually I sorted through everything. I had a small box of memories I wanted to keep, but… I just wasn't up throwing the rest away yet. I decided to store them in the loft. I knew the house had one, although I had never been inside. It had always been locked. It wasn't a mystery or anything, just that my grandpa hadn't needed to get anything from up there while I was living with him. At least, I thought so.

It was only then I realised I had never been inside it. More annoyingly, I quickly discovered that none of the keys I'd been given for the place were for the padlock. No luck searching for it around the rest of the house, either. In the end I had to cut the lock off with a pair of bolt cutters I found in the garage.

There was also a ladder in the garage, so getting up through the small, square hole wasn't a problem. I realised then that I didn't have a torch, and it was very dark. Despite it being the middle of summer, the loft was cool, almost cold. I considered heading back down to get a torch and a jacket, but as I reached out my hand, it brushed against something which felt like a pull-cord. I gave it a tug, and a small, weak bulb came to life, and I saw what was inside.

When I had first remembered about the loft, I'd been annoyed. I thought there'd be so much more stuff up there, days more sorting to go through. But when I turned on the light, I saw that it was almost completely empty. The only things there were an old steamer trunk, a small stool and a bright red calliope organ. The ceiling was higher than I expected as well. I could stand at my full height without stooping.

I walked slowly towards the old steam organ. It was bright red, and in excellent condition, except for a thick layer of dust. There was a small brass plaque simply reading “The Calliaphone”. The brass pipes that stuck out from the top still shone faintly under the dust, and I noticed that there was writing, carved onto the cover of the keyboard. It read: “Be still, for there is strange music”.

I went to the steamer trunk next, and was surprised to find it unlocked. Opening it released a cloud of dust and I coughed a few times before I got the heavy lid up. Inside were dolls. Lots of them. They looked old, with ragged, limp cloth bodies topped with oversized round heads and large, painted eyes that stared up from their shadowed trunk. The hair on each was intricate and woollen, and while they certainly weren’t the sort of dolls a ventriloquist would use, the heads had similar mouths, wooden blocks that would have opened and closed to simulate speech. At least, they should have had. Almost all of them had had their jaw block roughly torn off, leaving nothing but jagged splinters between their cheeks.

There were 23 dolls I counted in total, and only one of them still had its jaw intact. It was the oldest-looking by far, and was a small clown doll. Its threadbare body was white and purple polka-dot, with three pompoms down the front, and a ruff just below the head. It had no woollen hair left, but instead had a tall, pointed white cap on top. Its face was painted a pure white, and its eyes were shut, with black lines drawn across them. The only colour was a splash of red across the hinged jaw. A smile.

Like I said, I'm not scared of clowns, and I'm not scared of dolls. The thing was ugly, though. I was kind of relieved, actually, to have found some of my grandpa's old things that I would have no problem throwing away. Or maybe selling. They were definitely antiques, so they might have been worth something. In any case, I put the nasty-looking clown doll back in the box and closed the lid. I definitely closed the lid.

[DOOR OPENS]

I went back over to the calliope. There was-

SASHA

I thought it was pronounced "Ka-lee-o-pee?"

ARCHIVIST

Sasha? You're… back early – I thought you were trying to get hold of those police reports for the Harold Silvana case?

SASHA

Tried and succeeded. They were actually quite helpful.

ARCHIVIST

Oh… well. Good work.

SASHA

So, do we know if it's pronounced "Ka-lee-o-pee" or "Kuh-ly-o-pee"?

ARCHIVIST

I have also heard it said as “Ka-lee-ope”.

SASHA

Seriously? By who?

ARCHIVIST

Americans.

SASHA

Ah.

ARCHIVIST

As far as I can tell there isn’t a “correct” pronunciation. But they were originally named after the Greek muse Calliope, so…

SASHA

Are people going to understand that it’s from Greek mythology?

ARCHIVIST

If they’re working for the Magnus Institute, then I would hope so.

SASHA

I’ve just heard it more often as “ka-lee-o-pee”.

[DOOR CLOSES]

ARCHIVIST

Statement continues.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I went back to the calliope. There was no lock on the lid, or any switch that I could see on the outside. I opened it, and the keys inside shone as though they had just been polished. Now, at the time I didn't know how a calliope worked. I just thought it was like a weird pipe piano. I didn't know that there needed to be a blower working for the thing to play, and even if I had, I wouldn't have known where to find one or how to use it. By rights, when I sat in front of it and pressed the first key down, nothing should have happened. The four tall rows of brass whistles should have remained silent. Instead, there came a loud, howling tone from one of the pipes and I almost fell off my seat in surprise. I remember once, hearing the sound of a steam organ could be heard from over a mile away, and when that shrill whistle sounded I could believe it.

I started to play a tune. My grandpa had had a piano once. It had broken years before and he'd never had the money to replace it, but he had taught me the basics. There was one tune that, when I was a child, I always insisted he play to me. He never told me its name, if it even had one. I always used to just call "Faster Faster", by way of a description. A cheery, upbeat circus melody that started out almost unbearably slow and gathered in tempo, getting faster and faster until my grandpa's fingers were a blur. He always indulged

me when I asked him to play it, and now I played it for him. The wailing whistles were almost deafening in that cramped space. I knew I'd probably be hearing from the neighbours about it, but I didn't care. I just played.

The tune got faster, more frantic, and I felt something building inside me. It was like final closure for the loss of my grandpa was just out of reach, and if I got faster, if I played with enough speed I could catch it. But my finger slipped, and the music abruptly became a discordant cacophony. I never was as good as Grandpa Nick. I sat there in silence for a minute. When I turned to leave, though, I saw that the old steamer trunk was open, and the clown doll lay on top of the pile. Even though its painted eyes were still shut, I felt like it was looking at me. Its smile seemed slightly wider than before. I shut the trunk and climbed down the ladder.

I didn't really think about the weird things in the loft over the next week or so. I had too much else to do. It was only when Josh was next round, and asked me why the small hole into the attic was open, that I remembered. I told him I had something cool to show him, and got the ladder out. He was suitably impressed by the calliope, but freaked out a bit over the dolls. I didn't realise he was scared of them. He made me shut the steamer trunk almost as soon as he saw them, and kept looking over to make sure it was closed. I decided not to tell him about the first time it had popped open.

He asked if I could play anything on the ancient steam organ, and so I sat down and began to play my grandpa's old circus tune. Again I began to pick up speed, to play faster and faster as the whistles

began to shriek. I felt a hand touch mine firmly, abruptly stopping the music. Josh stood there, shaking slightly, his face deathly pale. On impulse I looked over to the chest of dolls, but the lid was firmly shut. I asked him what was wrong and he said he didn't know. He just wanted to leave. Now. So we did. Climbed back down out of the loft, and I lowered the wooden trapdoor behind us.

The next few weeks were… unpleasant. I don't want to go into detail. Let's just say I discovered that Josh was just another asshole after all. Our relationship was already going through a rocky patch. It didn't help that in those last weeks he became moody, short-tempered, constantly on edge. When I finally found out that he had… It doesn't matter. We broke up. It left me pretty much destroyed, coming so soon after my grandpa's death. I just tuned everything out again.

Eventually, it was tripping over a box that did it. One of the ones I'd put all my grandpa's stuff into, and never actually got round to putting in the loft. I decided to just get it over with. I guess I hoped a tidier house would give me more space to think. So, for the third time, I got out that ladder and climbed into the loft. It didn't take as long to store all the boxes as I'd thought, and within an hour I was done. I had been so intent on packing away all my memories that I hadn't even looked at the old steamer trunk. As I went to climb down I glanced over, and I froze.

The lid was open again, and the clown doll was on top. It wasn't looking at me this time. Instead, it seemed to be facing a doll I hadn't seen before. This one still had its jaw as well, and I swear it

looked just like Josh. Same tatty brown jacket, same old jeans. Its black, woollen hair even did that flicky thing he always spent so long getting right. It was lying against the side of the box, and I swear it looked like the clown was reaching for it. I slammed the box lid down and got the hell out of there. I bought a padlock the next day.

Now, I've brought a copy of the police report I gave, because you have to believe me that I did not play that calliope again. I had nothing to do with what happened to Josh. I came home from the cinema about a week later to find that my grandpa – my house had been broken into. Here, it's all in the report on the burglary I gave to the police. The front door lock was shattered and it swung gently to and fro. At first I ran into my living room, my bedroom, but nothing had been taken. The electronics, my jewellery, it was untouched. I felt my stomach drop as I realised, and ran towards the loft. Sure enough, it was open, the padlock torn from its hook. The calliope and the steamer trunk were gone.

They questioned my neighbours about it. None of them had seen anything, except for Mrs. Harlow next door, who said she noticed two people taking out pieces of red sheet metal and brass pipes. She didn't remember any details, just said that they "looked legitimate" and she thought I was having some things moved. The police never found them.

I just need you to believe that. To know I didn't play the thing again. It wasn't my fault, what happened to Josh. God knows I hated him enough back then, but… I could never have called

anything like that upon him. Not like that. I don't suppose you need me to tell you how they found him. Four days later, dead in his room. His throat was crushed. And his jaw was torn clean off. The police never found it.

I wouldn't have thought of it, really. Wouldn't have… put it all together even then. Not if it hadn't been for the fact that, in the last days of our relationship, Josh had broken down. He told me that he still heard that calliope music. Far off, when he was alone. And it had been getting gradually closer. I mean, they say you can hear one from almost a mile away.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

While I have what I would consider to be some natural reservations about a tale of murderous clown dolls, there are a few things that make me more inclined than usual to believe this statement. Firstly, as Ms. Denikin mentioned, she did provide a copy of the official police report into the burglary, which includes testimony from one Irene Harlow that appears to confirm Ms. Denikin did possess both a steamer trunk and calliope organ, so those at least existed.

The death of Joshua Drury is also at least as mysterious as she made it sound. In addition to his jaw being torn clean off his skull, residual evidence indicates that his throat was crushed with some sort of rope, apparently woven out of thick wool. There was no evidence of a struggle or of forced entry, no DNA evidence of

anyone in the room aside from himself. No-one was ever arrested for the crime.

When discussing this case, Tim said it reminded him of some articles he'd read on travelling circuses in Russia and Poland during the early 20th century. On a whim, I hunted down a few of the volumes he mentioned in the Institute's library, and sure enough, on page 43 of Gregory Petry's *Freaks and Followers: Circuses in the 1940s,* I found a reproduction of an old black-and-white photograph. It shows a small group of carnival workers: a contortionist, a fire-eater, two strong-men, a ringmaster and an organist sitting behind a calliope.

The photograph is labelled as being from 1948 and taken in Minsk, Russia. Only the ringmaster and organist are named: Gregor Osinov and Nikolai Denikin. The name of the troupe was Цирк другого *[[Tsirk druh-grova]]* – the Circus of the Other. The name rings a bell, but I can't find any other reference to it.

Ms. Denikin emigrated to South-East Asia two years ago, so was unavailable for any follow-up, but I'm sure there must be more on this somewhere in the Archives. Because I know for a fact that sitting in the Magnus Institute's Artefact Storage, is a bright red Calliaphone steam organ.

When I asked Elias, he just told me that the record of its acquisition was "probably in the archive somewhere," and no-one else knows anything beyond the fact that it was acquired somewhere in 2007. The keyboard cover is firmly locked, and scratched into the surface

are the words: “Be still, for there is strange music.”

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG025 – Growing Dark

Statement #0151904

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Mark Bilham, regarding events culminating in his visit to Hither Green Chapel. Original statement given April 19th, 2015. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Let's get one thing straight right now. I don't think I should be here. What happened was really weird and I'm pretty sure it was illegal, but it can't have been actually supernatural. Like ghosts and stuff. That's not real. No offence, I guess. I'm just here because I told Kathy what happened, and she insisted that I tell your Institute. She's more open to that kind of thing than me. Maybe that's why she chose to live with Natalie.

Sorry, I should start at the beginning. Kathy's my girlfriend. Katherine Harper. We've been dating about a year and a half now. She graduated last year but I'm doing a medical degree, so I'm not

leaving London for another couple of years. She managed to get a job as a trainee teacher up in East Ham, so ended up staying as well. I've got to say I'm glad about it. I'm not sure how good I'd be at a long-distance relationship. Anyway, the original plan was to move in together sooner, but stuff didn't match up properly and this was before she got the job, so she had to move back with her parents for a while. Long story short, I had to get a houseshare with some other med students, and she came up later, moving in with Natalie Ennis.

I don't know where Kathy met her. They've always been friends, but I don't think she was at uni with us. She never talked about it if she was. Kathy grew up in London, so maybe they were friends from school or something. She seemed nice, when I met her. Quiet, but nice. She was very serious, though. I don't know if I ever actually heard her laugh. Maybe she just didn't find my jokes funny. Who knows? She was religious, too. I've never had much time for God, myself, and Kathy didn't either. That's why I was kind of surprised the first time I visited her new place and found a framed Bible quote on the wall. Can't remember what it was. Something about Jesus and faith, I don't really know Bible stuff. Kathy said it was Natalie's. She didn't mind her putting it up there in the living room. Kathy's nice like that, you know? Just letting people be themselves.

Me and Natalie… didn't get on. I don't know if you picked up on that. We didn't hate each other or anything like that, we just… didn't have anything in common. She didn't really watch TV or movies, and I didn't know anything about crochet, politics or God,

which were pretty much her only interests. Kathy was always trying to get her to come out with us, and she'd just say no, which was fine by me. She always seemed happy enough, though, hooking yarn into whatever she was making at the time, reading some boring book on the political history of the bonnet or something.

That changed last October, when Natalie's mum died. I don't know how it happened, exactly. Heart failure, I think. It was sudden, I know that much, and it hit her hard. I mean, obviously it did, it was her mum, but I think… I think she lost her faith. The Bible quote wasn't on the wall the next time I went over, and when I asked Kathy about it, she gave me a look like I shouldn't bring it up. I didn't see much of Natalie after that. She was still around, I'd sometimes see her heading into the kitchen to get some food or tea or something, but apart from that she just stayed in her room.

So far, so normal, right? You lose your mum and it messes you up. That month was sad, but it's not what Kathy wanted us to talk to you about. No, it was what happened afterwards. It was after Natalie found her new church. It was Kathy who told me about it. This must have been about two months after Natalie's mum died. I must have asked how she was doing, if she was feeling any better. Kathy said that, yeah she was. Apparently, she'd found a new congregation and seemed to be getting some comfort there. She hadn't been crying so much at night, Kathy said, and hadn't been quite as prickly when she tried to talk. I noticed that the Bible quote hadn't gone back up, though.

I thought if she was doing better I'd probably see Natalie around

more when I stayed with Kathy, but if anything she seemed to almost completely disappear. She never seemed to be there when I went over. I'd see her leave in the evening and come home early in the morning, just as the sky was starting to get light. She'd go straight into her room, ignoring us completely. When I asked her where she'd been one time, she just told me "church". I asked her a few more questions, but she stared at me in this weird way until I got freaked out and left the room. I joked with Kathy that her flatmate was turning into a vampire, but instead of laughing she just got defensive and said that Natalie couldn't be a vampire. Then she started listing times she'd seen her in the sunlight, before just kind of trailing off. I think we both realised how messed up it was if she could list the number of times she'd seen Natalie in daylight.

Other strange stuff began to happen around the flat as well. The light bulbs kept blowing, to begin with. Well, that's not entirely true. It always seemed to be that when we got in after dark, we'd try to turn on the lights and, well, nothing would happen. At first, we just threw the old bulbs out and replaced them, but it kept happening. We checked the fuses, the sockets, Kathy even called the landlord to have someone check out the wiring, but it all seemed fine. The lights kept not working, though. Then I had a thought. The next time it happened, instead of changing the light bulb, I just tightened it. Just like that, it turned back on. The first time this happened, I was so surprised I nearly fell off the chair I was stood on. The bulbs hadn't been breaking, someone had been unscrewing them. Not much, not enough that we could spot it, just enough for them to not work. I say 'someone' had been doing this, but there

was only one person it could have been. For some reason, Natalie had been unscrewing all the lightbulbs in the flat, every chance she got.

That was also when Kathy started to look so tired. She kept nodding off when we went out for dinner and would often zone out when we were watching TV. I asked her about it, but she just brushed it off and said she hadn't been sleeping well. It wasn't until she was so tired she almost walked out in front of a car while she was crossing the road that I finally got her to tell me what was going on. She said that Natalie had started staying home at nights, but she was so loud that it stopped her sleeping. Natalie would wander through the living room and sing, in a language Kathy didn't know, and the tune was so discordant that it set her teeth on edge. Natalie would stop singing if she came into the living room, but would then just move to her room and the song would start again.

Kathy even said that when Natalie did leave, always at night, there would still be the sound of movement from her room. Shuffling, thumping noises, and occasionally the sound of something being knocked onto the floor. She'd come close to opening the door so often, but could never bring herself to do so. It seemed to be louder when she was trying to sleep, and once she thought it had moved into the living room, but she didn't go out to check. So no, Kathy wasn't getting much sleep. She started staying over with me a lot, as she said she just couldn't handle living alone with Natalie.

One night, she arrived at my house almost in tears. I took her up to my room, and sat her on the bed. She stared at me for a few

seconds and I was about to ask what was wrong, when she started to speak. She said that Natalie had tried to 'convert' her. She had come to Kathy's room earlier that night, knocked on the door, very polite. She'd seemed cheerier than she had since her mum's death, and asked if Kathy wanted to have some dinner and talk. Now, obviously, Kathy had wanted to discuss moving out for months, but she'd never been in a fit state, so she jumped at the chance.

The dining room was dark. Natalie must have unscrewed the lightbulb again because the switch did nothing. Thin slivers of moonlight coming through the curtains gave just enough light to see the table, and two bowls at either end. Natalie sat at one end, and waved for Kathy to sit at the other. Kathy had wanted to run… but didn't know quite how to do so. She said it would have felt… rude. So she sat down, and tried to eat what Natalie had prepared. She thought it might have been spinach, but if so it must have been boiled for far too long and all that remained was a stringy, limp mush. It was stone cold, and she could barely get through two forkfuls before she started to retch; it was so slimy. She pushed it away as gently as she could. She said Natalie just watched, not even glancing at her own bowl.

Finally, Kathy managed to get the nerve to speak, and told her she wanted to move out. There was silence for a long second, and then Natalie had said that she did as well. I'll admit I sighed with relief when Kathy said that, but she shook her head and continued. Natalie had begun to speak, longer and in more detail than she had for a long time. She had said that she needed to move out, that she

had a new home to be going to, a new family. She said that they were all going, that 300 years was a long time to wait, but she was lucky to have found it so close to the end. She said that it wasn't long until they were collected by Mr. Pitch. She said that Kathy could come too, if she liked. She could be saved.

It was at this point Kathy realised Natalie was talking about her 'church'. She became… very scared, and stood up, telling Natalie thanks, but she wasn't really one for Christian worship. And Natalie laughed at this. Laughed long and hard, never breaking eye contact. She had said, "No, but you're a natural for Them. You're worshipping as we speak." It was at that point Kathy ran, and came over to my house. Natalie hadn't tried to stop her.

At this point I was angry as all hell. If Natalie wanted to join some weird cult, and by that point we were both sure that's what it was, then that was her business, but she was scaring Kathy. There was no way I was going to let that stand. I told her that I was going over to her flat and was going to have it out with Natalie. I don't know what I was going to do. I mean, I wasn't going to hit her or anything; I just needed to make it clear that you couldn't just screw with people's lives like this. Kathy told me not to go, but she wasn't in any fit state to stop me. I got in the car and started to drive.

It was an overcast night, and without the moon the streets were dark. The lamps on the road seemed… dull, and even my headlights didn't reach as far as I thought they should. It wasn't far to the small house. I didn't expect any lights to be on, but the silent darkness of the place still sent a shiver down my spine. I had a key

to the door, and let myself in. I'd taken a torch from my car, and sure enough, the lights weren't turning on. The hallway was silent, but my nerves were on edge, and I started to look through each room in turn. Nothing. There was no sign of Natalie at all.

I stood there, in front of her room. It just had a normal, wooden fire door, but my hand still hesitated as I reached to open it. I knew it was empty, by now I was sure she wasn't home. Still, I was starting to feel that fear that Kathy had described, and I saw that my hand was shaking. I tried to ignore it, grit my teeth, and I opened the door.

The room inside was empty, as I had thought. But it wasn't just that Natalie was out; it was completely bare. No furniture, no possessions, nothing. The carpet had been torn up, leaving the bare floorboards exposed and the wallpaper had been stripped from the wall. All of it had been stuffed and nailed up against the room's only window, leaving it completely covered. No light from outside got through, and the torch was the only reason I could see at all. I started to look around for any clue to what Natalie had been doing, or where she had been.

In the corner, half-slipped between the boards, I spotted a piece of paper. It was small and thick, and seemed to have something written on it. Picking it up, I saw it had three words on it: Hither Green Dissenters. The other side had a symbol of some kind, written in thick marker pen: a curved line, with four straight lines coming off one side of it. Like a closed eye. I kept the paper, and your Institute can have it if you want. It's not like the police were

interested in it.

I called Kathy to tell her what I'd found. She was worried about me, but also about Natalie. Whatever this weird church was that she'd joined, I think we both reckoned it might be bad for her. Really bad. Kathy wanted to phone the police, but I told her there just wasn't enough for it to be a crime. Not yet. I told her I'd keep looking. I might have lied, to be honest, and said I was just going to look around the house more, but… well, I did a search for Hither Green Dissenters and it looked like there was an old abandoned chapel, the Hither Green Dissenters Chapel, in a graveyard near Lewisham. I had decided that I needed to check it out. No idea what I was hoping to find. Enough to call the police in, I guess.

By now it was just past midnight; the drive down wasn't too difficult. There was still that thickness to the night, a heavy gloom that deadened all light. Like someone had turned the brightness down on London. I found a parking spot not too far away from Hither Green Cemetery, and started to walk towards it. The iron gates stood wide open, so I went in.

The graveyard itself wasn't as bad as I'd feared. If anything it felt quite peaceful. The darkness seemed right for it, and the stones stood silent and firm. I walked along the path, until my light fell across a small building. The chapel. It was tiny, surrounded by temporary fencing that looked like it had been there long enough to become permanent. It had a single, pointed bell tower, and the windows were covered with old boards that looked like they'd seen the worst of the rain. There was only a single entrance, a pair of

double doors set at the front. To my surprise, they stood open. I called out Natalie's name, shouted and asked if anyone was in there, but there was only silence.

I shouldn't have gone in. Of course I shouldn't have gone in. I'm not that stupid. I've never been that stupid. But for some reason, standing there in that dark, empty cemetery, I made the decision to look inside.

It was easy to squeeze past the barriers. I still had my torch with me, but it didn't shine very far in. I entered slowly, casting my light over everything, just in case there were some hooded cultist freaks waiting to jump me, but there were only old, broken pews, discarded bottles and cigarette ends. The normal detritus any abandoned building collects. I was just about to turn around and leave… when my torch died.

Immediately I was plunged into complete darkness. No light was coming in through the door. I couldn't even see where the door was, everything around me was pitch black. I tried to get the torch to turn back on, turning the bulb and hitting it in a near panic. I tried to take the batteries out and put them back in, but I couldn't see anything, and I ended up fumbling and dropping them. I knelt down and tried to feel where they were, but the ground felt… odd. I hadn't paid much attention to it when I first came in, but the floor had been chipped, dusty and covered with a layer of junk. But… when I started to feel around for the batteries, it felt smooth and clean and very cold, like marble or something.

I called out for help, but my voice just echoed in the silence. Then the singing started. It seemed like there were dozens of voices, but they didn't match together right. Some were singing really high and others so low it made my teeth hurt. The words were in some other language, but I remember they kept coming together for the words "Nee-allisand" or "allisunt", I think. I was freaking out, so I got to my feet and started to walk forward as fast as I was able, my hands stretched out in front of me in case I hit anything. The chapel couldn't have been more than thirty feet long, and maybe twenty wide, but I walked for well over a minute without hitting anything. I just staggered through the complete darkness, with that awful singing everywhere. At one point I honestly thought I might have died and gone to hell.

Finally, my fingers brushed against something. It was cold, like the floor, but rough. It felt like rusted metal. Thin strips of rusted metal in a criss-cross pattern, with small gaps between them. At least, that's what it felt like. I didn't hold on to them for very long, because as my hands rested there, I felt… fingers reach through the holes and try to grab me. I couldn't see them, but they felt leathery as they brushed against my skin.

I screamed and leapt back, falling to the floor, and as I did so I felt something hard jab me in the hip. My phone. In all that had happened I had forgotten I had it. I reached in and pressed the button and the screen lit up, faint and barely visible, but I started crying like it was the first light I had seen in months. It didn't light up anything else, but as the singing began to crescendo I

desperately went to the torch function and turned it on. And it did turn on, in a sudden flash of brilliance, and the singing stopped.

In the silence I shone the makeshift torch in front of me and saw a broken pew. The floor was once again covered in junk and I could see the doorway behind me, leading out into the night. I ran, calling Kathy first, and then the police.

They didn't find anything, of course. They gave me a telling off about trespassing and took down a missing person report about Natalie. Nothing was found, and as far as I know she's still gone. I didn't tell Kathy exactly what happened for a few weeks, but when I finally did, she made me come here and talk to you

I think that's everything. Can I go now?

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

The last section, naturally, is the one that invites my scepticism, but let us disregard that for now and discuss the other aspects. Sasha has confirmed that Natalie Ennis was reported missing by Mr. Bilham on March the 11th, 2015. There were no leads regarding her location beyond the piece of paper mentioned in the statement, and no traces of any church or cult was found within the Hither Green Dissenters Chapel, or the graveyard surrounding it. When we contacted Mr. Bilham and Ms. Harper to follow up, neither of them had heard from her in the intervening year, nor did they have anything to add to the statement.

The symbol upon the piece of paper does indeed resemble a stylised, closed eye, and there are enough other parallels to statement 0020312 to make me suspect – and a suspicion is all that it is at present – that the People's Church of the Divine Host may still be in existence. Also of note, the words "Ny Alesund". I don't know for sure if Mr. Bilham remembered them correctly, but Tim pointed out that Ny-Ålesund is actually a small town in Norway. In fact, except for research installations, it is the most northerly human settlement on Earth, located at a latitude of North 78°55′30″. It is a company town, owned and operated by Outer Bay, but what it has to do with Mr. Bilham's account is anyone's guess. Assuming it isn't all… coincidence. That far north… during the winter… nights can last for a very long time

Martin found one other thing while combing through police reports for the Hither Green area. About a month after this statement was given, on May 15th, 2015, police were called out to once again investigate the chapel. Neighbours had apparently heard screams from inside, just after 11pm, but when officers arrived they found nothing to indicate any sort of incident or foul play. I'd be content enough to ignore this… if it wasn't for the fact that, according to the official file, May 15th, 2015 was the day Gertrude Robinson, my predecessor, passed away.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG026 – A Distortion

Statement #0160204

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Are you sure you're all right to do this now? You can take a few days off to recover if you need.

SASHA

No, it's fine. Tim's getting me a coffee, and I'd rather get this down while it's still fresh in my mind. Besides, you didn't give Martin any time off when he had a bad experience.

ARCHIVIST

Martin had to start living in the archives. I mean, I could hardly give him a holiday in the office. Anyway, **he** wasn't injured.

SASHA

It's just a scratch, John. I'll be fine. Can we begin?

ARCHIVIST

Okay. Statement of Sasha James, assistant archivist at the Magnus Institute, London, regarding…

SASHA

Let's just call it 'a series of paranormal sightings'.

ARCHIVIST

Statement recorded direct from subject, 2nd of April, 2016.

SASHA

Right. Well, I'm sure you know I was sceptical about how dangerous this Jane Prentiss was when you first suggested Martin stay in the archive. I mean, it's not that I didn't believe him about what happened, it just seemed… Well, Martin is a great researcher, but his self-preservation instincts are not the strongest, and to be frank I thought that if this Prentiss were the danger everyone seemed to think, then he'd almost certainly be dead.

Don't get me wrong, I mean, I've read the same statements and profiles as you, so I know how many people have died because of her. What was it, six hospital staff when she was first admitted?

ARCHIVIST

Six from colonisation and a seventh… with a broken neck from her escape.

SASHA

But that was two years ago, and whatever she is now, it sounds like her condition is degenerating. I just wasn't sure how much damage she'd still be capable of. So I guess… I didn't take as much care as I

should have when I was coming into the Institute yesterday. The thing is, I'm still not sure how much of a threat she is. I've seen plenty of those silver worm things squirming about outside, same as you, and I've made a point to step on them every time. What happened just made things more… complicated, I guess. I'm not really sure what to think.

I'll start with the first thing I noticed. I live up near Finsbury Park, and my building is old. Victorian, I think, and though it's been repaired and maintained quite well, it's got all sorts of strange little quirks. One of these is the windows. The actual windows in the flats are fine, but the stairwells – they have slightly warped glass, where the windows have those little bubbles. Looking down on the street below can be a bit strange, as the glass bends the light and distorts whatever's below it. I never really paid much attention to it until a few days ago, but it's not a new thing.

It was the day before yesterday when I first saw it. When I'm heading down the stairs in the morning, I sometimes like to spend a few seconds looking out of the window at the people on the street below. I'll move my head so that I see them through the warped glass, and they'll distort like a funhouse mirror. It's a bit daft, but I have a pretty dreary commute down to Victoria, so I take my fun where I can get it. Well, on that morning I paused before the window, and noticed one of the warped figures below was… off, slightly. It looked too tall, the limbs and body were very thin and almost wavy, like they didn't have any structure or bones in them. I, I couldn't make out a face, but it was the hands that were the

most bizarre. They seemed to be stretched and inflated by the distorted light, until they were almost the size of the rest of the torso. The fingers were long and stiff, and seemed to end in sharp points. It stood completely motionless, and I could feel it staring at me.

Moving my head to the side, I saw that the actual person I had been looking at was a large man with long, blond hair. He was neither stood still nor facing me, instead moving around the display of the flower shop opposite my building. Nothing about the guy seemed especially out of place, but I made a mental note to keep a lookout for him. I checked again through the bubble of bended glass and again I saw that tall figure with its limp arms and huge hands.

Now, you know me John, I'm, I'm not exactly the bravest person in the world. I generally avoid horror and I tend to stay off rollercoasters in the rare situation I have a chance to ride them. So I was as surprised as anyone that this undeniably sinister figure wasn't causing me more distress. I mean, I was a bit nervous, sure. I've never had any direct experience with the supernatural before, and the more I looked and checked and double-checked, the more sure I was that supernatural was exactly what it was. To be honest, I was surprised how quickly I accepted that. I've always considered myself a bit of a sceptic, and until recently I'd have said working at the Institute only made me more so.

Anyway, I watched it for about ten minutes, until the blond man bought a small bunch of lilies and walked away. Once he was gone, the distorted figure with the long hands disappeared as well. I

headed down into the street and over to the flower shop. The woman working there gave me a bit of a confused look when I asked if there had just been a tall, blond man in her shop. She said yes there had, and no, she hadn't noticed anything strange, and was I looking to buy some flowers. I was quite confused myself, and on a bit of an edge when I left. I was already late for work, though, so I decided to ignore it and just keep an eye out.

Sure enough, it wasn't too long before I saw him again. There's a small café I generally pop into when I head to work in the morning. I love the Institute's building, of course, it's beautiful, but from a money point of view, I really wish it wasn't in Chelsea. Everything around here is so expensive. I generally walk down from Victoria Station. It's a long walk, but quite pretty, and it gives me a chance to pick up a coffee on the way. As I said, I was running late that morning, so I was a bit conflicted about whether to get one, but as I looked in the window I saw a familiar figure at one of the corner tables. Again, the blond guy wasn't looking in my direction, nor did he seem to give any indication that he was aware of my existence. He was there, though, and I was on the verge of walking in and confronting him when I noticed the time and decided getting to work was more important. Besides, what's that old saying? "Once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, three times is enemy action". I decided that if he turned up a third time, then I would ask him… something. I don't really know what I was planning to ask him. "Are you secretly a monster?" probably would have been a *great* opener.

When I got here, I realised I needn't have worried so much about the time. You were having some argument with Tim about… um, oh, who's that architect he's obsessed with?

ARCHIVIST

(slightly disgusted) Robert Smirke.

SASHA

Yeah, that's the one. So, I was starting to regret not getting a coffee and talking to tall, blond and monster, since it didn't seem like I'd have missed much. I got on with my work, did some filing, cross-checked a few statements with police incident reports. I mean, I guess I don't need to tell you what a day working in the archives entails. It was a quiet day, aside from when Martin thought he saw one of those silver worms and we spent *(laugh)* half an hour checking for it.

ARCHIVIST

(completely disgusted) Yes. I remember.

SASHA

Come on, it's not his fault he's being stalked by some weird living hive.

ARCHIVIST

I know, but it would have to have been Martin, wouldn't it? I mean, anything goes wrong around here, it always seems to happen to

him. Anyway, we're getting off topic. Why didn't you report this?

SASHA

Seriously? If a member of the public came in, you would have torn that statement to shreds. No, I, I figured I'd get more evidence or it wasn't worth mentioning.

Nothing else had happened until I left work. It must have been about half past six, so the sun was just about starting to go down, and I headed back up towards Victoria. The first thing I noticed out of the ordinary was that the café was still open. Normally they shut up about six o'clock, but the lights were on and the door was open. I couldn't see anyone behind the counter, though, and there was only one customer. He sat there in the exact same position he'd been in that morning, drinking what could easily have been the exact same coffee.

I looked around to see if there was anyone else who could confirm what I was seeing. The street was empty, but as I looked, a car drove past. In the curving glass of its tinted windows, I saw him there, the weird distorted body, rail-thin and limp, the hands huge and sharp. And then the car passed on and I turned back to see a normal-looking man. But now, for the first time, he was looking at me. He gestured to the chair across from him, clearly inviting me inside. I don't know why I wasn't more scared going in there, but I wasn't. My curiosity apparently conquered my nervousness.

He didn't speak when I sat down, and I saw his coffee cup was

empty. Whatever was inside had dried up hours ago. He seemed to be waiting for me to ask him a question. So I asked him *what* he was. He laughed at this, the first sound I'd heard him make, and it sounded… unnatural. Like he was laughing very quietly, but someone had turned up the volume up so I could hear it. He said it didn't matter what he was, that he couldn't describe it even if he wanted to. What was the phrase he used… "How would a melody describe itself when asked?"

This put my back up a bit to be honest, and I told him if he was going to talk in cheap riddles I was just going to leave. He actually apologised, told me I could call him Michael. I didn't want to call him Michael; it didn't seem to *fit* somehow, and the way he said it made me think that it *definitely* was not his name. Still, it wasn't like I had any other name for him. – no, not for him. For *it*.

It sat there, clearly waiting for me to ask another question – so I did. I asked it what it wanted, and was told that it wanted to help.

ARCHIVIST

Help? With… what?

SASHA

That's what I said. Did it want to stop Jane Prentiss? It laughed that weird laugh again and told me that I had no idea what was really going on. It didn't sound like it had any intention of telling me, though, it just seemed like it was amused by my attempts to understand. Then it said it didn't care if I or my companions lived

or died, but that “the flesh-hive was always rash”. It said it wanted to be friends. When it said this it put its hand in mine, and it may have looked like a human hand, but it was heavy. It felt like a… wet leather bag full of heavy stones. Sharp stones.

I pulled my hand away quickly and got up to leave. By this point I was just about sick of this weird thing that looked like a person but was not a person and talked in riddles. It made no move to stop me as I headed towards the door. As I was about to exit, though, it called after me, and said if I was interested in saving your life it would be waiting at Hanwell Cemetery.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, saving **my** life?

SASHA

Yeah. It called *you* by name. You. And Martin. And Tim.

ARCHIVIST

That’s… unsettling.

SASHA

It really was. At the time I just tried to ignore it. I went home and I got as much sleep as I could. I don’t know if you noticed how tired I was yesterday, what with Tim’s April Fools’ joke and everything.

ARCHIVIST

Don't remind me.

SASHA

Well, I was a bit of a mess. I checked the cafe on the way in, and on the way home, I even went down there on my lunch, but 'Michael' wasn't there. Part of me wanted to tell you about it immediately, to make a statement, but even if you believed me I knew you'd try and talk me out of going to Hanwell Cemetery, and I had just about made my mind up to go. I didn't know if what 'Michael' had said was a threat or a warning or just a lie, but I decided I couldn't take the chance. So I went to the cemetery.

The sun was starting to go down when I got there, and the gates of the graveyard were lit with the bright orange of the dying light. It had been raining earlier that day, and the pools of water reflected the vivid colours of the sky. Hanwell is an old cemetery, and past the walls I could see the weathered old gravestones standing silent. As it turned out, I didn't have to go inside. Michael was waiting for me next to the tall iron gates when I arrived. I caught a glimpse of its reflection in one of the deep pools of rainwater, and shuddered as I saw again – the warped body and swollen, bony hands.

It didn't say anything when I arrived, just nodded at me to follow. I have no idea how long it stood there waiting for me. I expected to go into the graveyard, but instead Michael started walking down the road towards a nearby row of houses. The sign on the road said Azalea Close. Most of the buildings were in good repair, but there was one at the end that looked abandoned. It might have been a

pub at one point, but now all the windows were boarded with metal sheets, and covered with dirt and graffiti. The door, however, was open and swinging gently. Michael went inside, clearly expecting me to follow, so I did.

Inside was dark and dusty. I was annoyed with myself that I hadn't thought to bring a torch, but just enough of the setting sun came through the door for me to see by. It clearly had once been a pub, and the bar appeared to be intact, though riddled with woodworm. Sitting on top of it was what looked like a builder's kit, with a toolbox and a small fire extinguisher. I was just about to ask Michael why we were here, when I heard it. A low, wet groan coming from the far end of the room, where the light didn't reach. It sounded like someone in a great deal of pain.

I walked towards the noise. As I got closer my eyes began to adjust, and I saw the floor was covered in pale, writhing shapes. I had a listen to Martin's statement after you recorded it, so I knew what to expect. But hearing about something doesn't even come close to seeing it. To smelling it. I expected to see what Martin described – a squirming mass that was once Jane Prentiss – but the figure slumped against the wall looked like it was once a man. The worms wriggled out through the holes in his skin. The 'flesh-hive', Michael had called it, and the silver things formed clustered knots where his eyes used to be. I couldn't help it. I gasped.

It wasn't a loud sound, and given how sick the whole situation made me feel I think I actually was quite composed. It was loud enough, though. The head snapped around to face me, dislodging a

small cascade of twisting shapes. The mouth opened as he tried to scream, but that wasn't what came out of his mouth. The worms also seemed to have taken notice and began to move towards me at an alarming speed. I backed away, but slipped on a piece of loose wood and fell into the bar. I glanced desperately at Michael, but it just watched me, its face unreadable.

I started to try and stamp on the worms as they approached, but there was just too many of them. Staggering to my feet, I felt my hand come to rest on something cold and metal – the fire extinguisher. Without thinking, I pulled the pin out and squeezed the handle. A cloud of gas shot out and, to my surprise, the silver worms began to shudder and recoil, shrivelling and dying. I began to walk forward, catching every last one in the jet of gas. Finally, I found myself standing over the mass of pitted and hollow skin that was once a man. He shuddered violently as the gas engulfed him, and then lay still.

I was breathing heavily, and the CO2 from the fire extinguisher was making me feel light-headed. For some reason I felt like I should check his pockets. They were empty except for a wallet. It was stained with blood and other… substances, but the name on the driver's licence was still readable: Timothy Hodge.

As I stood there, staring at the wallet, I felt a sharp pain in my right arm. I looked up to see Michael, reaching *into* my shoulder. Its fingers were long and distorted as they reached *through* my skin, cutting it like paper. I screamed. After a few seconds, it withdrew its hand. Held there was a single silver worm, wriggling pathetically

in its grip. I hadn't even felt the thing burrowing into my arm.

After that it's all a bit of blur. I remember I was going to phone the police, but Timothy Hodge's corpse was gone, and I was worried about trespassing, so I just sort of wandered away. Michael, or whatever it was, had gone as well. Eventually I found my way back to the Institute, where I must have woken up Martin and, well, here we are.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I, uh, suppose we are.

SASHA

(expectant) So. What do you think?

ARCHIVIST

I, uh… I don't really know. We can look into it more later.

SASHA

I should *really* quit, you know. We, we all should. I don't think this is a normal job, I, I don't think this is a **safe** job.

ARCHIVIST

You're probably right.

Do you *want* to quit?

SASHA

No. I'm just… I'm just too damned curious, I suppose.

You?

ARCHIVIST

No.

Whatever's going on, I need to know.

Get some rest.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

Statement ends.

Obviously there is little we can really do to follow up Sasha's experience. If it was any of the others I might have cause to doubt, but she has always been the most… level-headed of the team, and if she says that this is what happened, then I believe her.

This does at least explain what happened to Timothy Hodge, whose disappearance shortly after making his statement in late 2014 has been something of a concern since I discovered it. It seems odd how different the effect of Prentiss'… infestation was on him and Harriet Lee, but without more information I don't have a working theory on why that might have been.

The thing that most disquiets me about Sasha's statement is this 'Michael'. She seems pretty convinced that he was not human, at least not in the conventional sense. Almost every statement I've catalogued has engaged with the paranormal in some form of *antagonistic* relationship. The idea that there are things out there like that that want to *help* us… For some reason, that makes me more uncomfortable than the worm-infested creature stalking the Institute.

Sasha has taken a few days off to recuperate, and I'm having a word with Elias about getting some extra CO2 fire extinguishers for the Archive.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG027 – A Sturdy Lock

Statement #0032408

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Paul McKenzie, regarding repeated nocturnal intrusions into his home. Original statement given August 24th, 2003. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

It's strange to live alone. Maybe not if you're used to it, I suppose. If you've lived a solitary life then I'm sure it doesn't feel so isolated or empty. Heck, I remember a time when I wouldn't have batted an eyelid at living on my own. But now I'm so used to having other people in the house that it's a sad, lonely existence I've found myself living. Even before I started having my nightly visitor.

My son Marcus moved out about two years ago, and before that he'd spent a lot of time away at university or, later, moving around because of his work. So I'd grown accustomed to his absence. But when Diane, my wife, passed away four months ago it has… left the

place so terribly hollow. I tell myself that it was a mercy, that by the end her condition meant she wasn't able to live as she deserved to. And while I'm sure it's true, the sentiment does little to make the bed seem anything other than far too large for just me. She'd hate me saying that. Diane never had any time for mopers or people who wallowed in self-pity, but after forty years of marriage I think I've earned it.

The thing about living in a house full of people is that you can just ignore any noises that you hear in the night. Is that a creak on the stairs? It's probably just someone going down for a glass of water. What was that thump? Probably Marcus up too late, and accidentally knocking things off the table. I know it doesn't actually make you less likely to be robbed or broken into, but you stop panicking about it every time you hear the slightest noise from outside your room. I think that's normal, at least. I've never considered myself to have a nervous disposition, but maybe other people just get on with things and don't worry so much.

Still, since Diane died my nights have become a constant vigil. No house is silent if you listen hard enough, and since ending up alone, I have been listening so hard that at points I have to remind myself to breathe. Now every soft groan of the settling house is the sound of some violent thug or burglar in my home, waiting to see if they need to kill me. Marcus has suggested I get a pet so the house doesn't feel so empty, but I've never had a pet before, and I'm too old to learn now.

Given how alert and paranoid I generally am when trying to sleep

in an empty house, I'm sure you can imagine my terror when I heard something outside my room one night about a month ago. I've lived in the same house since I married Diane, and I know every squeaky floorboard. It was the one just at the top of the stairs. I waited, desperately straining my ears to hear any other sound of movement. I had heard no windows break or doors open downstairs, and I definitely hadn't heard anyone coming up the stairs, but I was convinced there was someone there. I could feel their presence waiting on the landing. Had they realised how loud the floorboard was? Were they stood there, motionless, listening for any movement from me just as keenly as I was listening for them?

Then the sound came again, and I was sure there was someone stood at the top of the stairs, but rather than staying there, I began to hear the heavy tread of what was unmistakably footsteps. At first I… simply lay there, paralysed with fear, thinking that I would just… stay, let them take anything they wanted from the house, and call the police once they had left. But from what I could make out they didn't seem to be going into any of the other rooms. They were slowly, and deliberately, walking towards my bedroom.

The door does have a lock on it, but it's been so long since I even thought to use it that, at the time, I couldn't even think where the key might have been. My heart almost stopped when I heard the door handle rattle ever so gently as a hand was placed upon the other side. And slowly, so painfully slowly, the doorknob began to turn. In a burst of adrenaline I didn't even know I was capable of, I sprang out of the bed and across the room. I seized the handle and

twisted it back the other way, using both hands to try and match the strength of whoever was on the other side.

Still the handle tried to turn, with a slow, relentless effort that spoke of patience and determination, but sheer panic lent me equal strength. My hands began to grow wet with what I assumed, at the time, was sweat, and I worried about keeping my grip. I did, though. For twenty long minutes, I wrestled in the dark over the door handle of my room. I could have reached the light switch, but that would have meant having only one hand to keep on the door, so I stayed in the dark.

Then all at once the pressure vanished. The handle no longer tried to turn. I had heard no other sound from outside, though. No footsteps leading away, no sound of someone going down the stairs, the house was just silent. I stood there for the rest of the night, the handle gripped tight. And it wasn't until the first rays of sun peeked through the windows that I found I had the courage to open my bedroom door and look outside.

Nothing.

I was so stiff that I could barely walk back to my bed and dial the number for the police. It was as I reached for the phone that I looked at my hands and saw that what was on them was not sweat. It was blood. I checked all over my hands and arms for cuts or injuries. Nothing. And the door handle was completely clean. I washed my hands thoroughly before I dialled 999.

The police came and they listened patiently to my story. They checked all around my house, but there were no signs of any intruder. All the windows and doors were still firmly locked and there was no sign of forced entry, nor had any of my possessions been taken or even moved. The officers assured me it was no problem, that they were happy to help, all in that tone that told me they thought I was just a senile old man hearing things in the night. I thanked them as they left, even though they had been of no help whatsoever, and spent the rest of the day searching for the key to my bedroom door. I found it in the end, and hoped that with it firmly locked I could sleep a bit easier that night. I was wrong.

When evening came, I tried to sleep. At least, I had convinced myself that I was trying to sleep. Actually, I was listening for any sign that the intruder had returned. Every creak of the house settling, every whine of the pipes sent me into a state of near terror. By two o'clock in the morning I had heard nothing, and had almost convinced myself that I would not be visited again, when there was that slow, ominous creak of the floorboard at the top of the stairs. As before, the footsteps approached my bedroom, heavy and methodical. I turned on my bedside lamp and watched as once again the handle of the door began to turn. I could see the pressure being put on the door by whoever was on the other side, but it was locked, and as the door failed to open, there was a long pause.

Then it began to turn violently back and forth, rattling and banging as it rotated with such force that I worried it might come off entirely. I let out a cry as the assault intensified, and phoned again

for the police. It took them twelve minutes to reach me, and all the while my bedroom door shook with the relentless turning of the handle, but the lock held firm. As soon as the doorbell rang, it went immediately still and silent. I didn't want to unlock and open the door, but if I didn't the police officers might break down my front door or, even worse, leave.

What happened next was almost identical to what had happened the day before, except this time there was less gentle tolerance in their voices when they spoke to me. I got the clear impression that if I called them again without proof, there would be… undesirable consequences. One of the two muttered something about how difficult it must be for me to live on my own, a message I got loud and clear. I have no intention of being put in a home.

And so, for the last month I have lain awake almost every night, as whatever it is beyond the threshold of my bedroom tries with all its might to get in. I watch the doorknob obsessively, always waiting for the signs of that gentle turning. The first ones are always so slow.

I tried to get proof for the police. I got Marcus to stay over with me a few nights, in the hope of either scaring the intruder away or having a witness who could corroborate my story. Those were the only nights I got any peace. Nothing came up to my door when he was there. In some ways it was a relief, to have a way of ensuring I could sleep, but it gave me no evidence to convince anyone, and I know he didn't believe me when I told him what was going on. He just looked… worried when I brought it up, and I didn't mention it

again.

Unfortunately, I can't get Marcus to stay with me every night. He has his own life to lead and is living with his fiancée at the moment, so I can't just ask him to move back in with his dad. I tried to set up some cameras in the upstairs hallway, at the top of the stairs and outside my room, but they show nothing. They don't even pick up the door handle turning, even at times I know for certain that the thing was trying to get inside. There was only one moment, just a frame or two, I think, where the shadows the camera caught on the wall seemed almost to form a face. It seemed to be leering at me, the mouth wide open in a mock scream. It scared me so badly that I had to delete the footage. I have no evidence for the police. Or for you either, I suppose.

I guess that's why I'm here. This is what you people do. You investigate these things. You know what to look for and can identify the signs of things that… aren't right. You know, not of this world. I'm not saying it's a ghost or anything like that, it's just… that well, if it was a ghost, you'd be the ones to talk to, right? I just need it to stop. And I don't want to be put in a home. I know they will, if I keep telling them about how my door handle rattles and turns every night, they'll think I'm senile and useless and send me to a home, and I will not let that happen. It's my house, and I don't care how much it scares me, nothing is going to make me give it up. Maybe Marcus is right. Maybe I should get a dog.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

I want to believe Mr. McKenzie, I really do. I am not entirely made of stone, and am apt to be moved by the plea of a scared old man as much as anybody. I mean, dementia is, of course, the most likely explanation, and he admits himself that he has no proof of any of it. Yet part of me still wants to believe him. Perhaps this job is making me sentimental.

In any case it's a moot point. Mr. McKenzie died of a stroke some two months after making this statement, and there doesn't seem to be any obvious connection between his passing and his statement to the Institute. When this was originally logged, apparently we did send a then-member of the research staff, one Sarah Carpenter, to take some readings of the house. Apparently, she felt there was little enough danger to justify an overnight vigil at the place, but like everyone else in Mr. McKenzie's tale, she encountered no strangeness or intruders on the upstairs landing, or in any other part of the building.

Sasha, who has now returned after her brief convalescence, has confirmed the call outs against police reports and they appear to match, though obviously they're rather light on detail. Martin made contact with the son, Marcus McKenzie, but he declined to talk to us, saying that he'd "already made his statement." This leads me to believe that Marcus McKenzie may also have a statement lurking somewhere here in the archives, lost among the mess and misfiling.

The only other thing that stands out from this as strange is that

Sarah Carpenter, the researcher originally sent to look into this back in 2003, took some rather detailed photographs of the interior and layout of the house. Looking through them now, it strikes me that the bedroom door, to which Mr. McKenzie refers so often, does not appear to have a keyhole, or any sort of lock.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG028 – Skintight

Statement #0161704

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Please state your name and the subject of your experience.

MELANIE

Into that? You're joking.

ARCHIVIST

I can assure you this will record just fine.

MELANIE

I knew you guys were a bit… slapdash, but this is absurd.

ARCHIVIST

No doubt you're used to a higher calibre of equipment when pretending to see ghosts in old churchyards and mental institutions.

MELANIE

People like a show. People like *our* show. And, even if we do ham it up a bit, even if we do add a bit of sparkle, we're still more

respected and evidence-based paranormal investigators than you and your lot. [NERVOUS, DISPARAGING LAUGH]

ARCHIVIST

We are not ‘paranormal investigators’. We are researchers. Scholars.

MELANIE

Whatever. The fact is, we may play it up a bit for the camera, but that’s because you can only look at temperature spikes and EMF readings for so long. We still only look into genuine, documented supernatural phenomena. You take any ridiculous story, from any drugged-up, dreaming, traumatised idiot off the street. Vampires, monsters under the bed, mind control – really! Who cares about evidence, who cares about scientific instruments when you can just tell a story to the Magnus Institute!

ARCHIVIST

And yet *you’ve* come to make a statement.

MELANIE

Well, yeah… But…

ARCHIVIST

Let me guess. None of your ‘respectable’, paranormal investigators would believe you?

MELANIE

[SIGH]

ARCHIVIST

Well, let me be quite clear. Chances are very strong that I won't believe you either. But we will take your statement. And we will look into it for you. Now, please state your name and the subject of your experience.

MELANIE

My name is Melanie King. I've got a YouTube channel called Ghost Hunt UK.

ARCHIVIST

And your statement is regarding…

MELANIE

What I saw at the abandoned Cambridge Military Hospital when we were filming there in January 2015.

ARCHIVIST

Recording date 17th April, 2016.

Hold on, the Cambridge Military Hospital? I was under the impression the hauntings there were very well-documented. Why would none of your 'respectable' colleagues believe you? I would have thought it would be right up their alley.

MELANIE

Because what I saw had nothing to do with the hospital itself. At least, I don't think it did.

ARCHIVIST

Go on.

MELANIE

Well, we'd been angling to film there for months. The show is pretty standard stuff – we head to the location after dark, we explore a bit, we set up the equipment, and then, of course, we spend some time afterwards analysing the data and –

ARCHIVIST

Seeing ghosts?

MELANIE

Well, yeah. Y'know what? Sometimes, sure. We do. We get evidence.

Anyway, we'd been angling to go into the CMH for months, er, but I couldn't get permission. Apparently there's asbestos in the walls; it makes it "too much of a health and safety hazard". It was due to be pulled down and turned into a housing development in June, though, so we were on a bit of a deadline.

Luckily, we're an independent show. I don't have anyone breathing

down my neck or checking my legals about this sort of thing. And it wouldn't be the first time that we were going to do something…

ARCHIVIST

Illegal?

MELANIE

Unorthodox! And hey, the worst that we've ever got before was a fine, so we figured it wasn't going to be too much of a problem. The team going in was meant to be me, my co-host Andy…

ARCHIVIST

Full names, please.

MELANIE (STATEMENT)

My co-host, Andy Caine, as well as Peter Warhol on sound and Antonia Farron, er, Toni, doing camera work. Thing is Pete got cold feet a few days before we were due to head out. Apparently he just wasn't comfortable with the possibility of asbestos. I guess I can understand, but it meant we were down a sound guy, so I put out feelers to see if anyone had any contacts who could step in.

Well, Georgie Barker, who hosts the "What the Ghost?" podcast, knew someone. She'd said she'd done a few location episodes of WTG with a sound engineer by the name of Sarah Baldwin, and could vouch for her reliability, although Georgie warned she was "a little bit unsocial". I reckoned we didn't need her talkative as long

as she knew her stuff, so I gave Sarah a call. She agreed to help us out, and I figured the episode was going to come out just fine.

So, the night of the twelfth rolled around, and Toni came round to pick us up. She's the one with the van, so generally does the driving. Me and Andy live together, so the three of us headed over to pick up Sarah. Her address was listed as in Sydenham, down in South London, but when we pulled up the building seemed dark. I don't think it was abandoned or anything like that, but it certainly didn't seem like anyone was home. Andy hopped out and buzzed her number on the doorbell, and after a minute of waiting there, there was no reply.

We were all just getting a little bit antsy, because if we don't have a sound tech, we don't have a show. So I gave Sarah a ring. And it went straight through to voicemail. I was just about ready to scream in frustration, but almost as soon as I put the phone down I got a call from an unknown number. I answered it, and immediately I heard her voice, asking if we were outside. I said yeah, and she ended the call immediately. We all watched the door, but another two minutes passed, and still no-one came out. Then, out of nowhere we heard a knock on the back of the van.

I hopped out, and standing there was Sarah. She was short, really short, with dark brown hair cropped close. She was wearing black cargo trousers and a grey T-shirt, with a light black jacket over the top. I… I thought that was a bit off as it was the middle of January. I mean, sure, it was a mild winter, but it's a long way from T-shirt weather.

I introduced myself, but she just nodded and lit a cigarette. I was about to say that we'd prefer she didn't smoke in the van, but she'd already opened up the back door and climbed inside, puffing away. I remembered Georgie's warning that she was 'a little bit unsocial' and kicked myself for not asking more about it. Still, she was here now, we had a sound tech, so we were going to be able to have an episode.

It was about a two hour drive to the CMH. It's down in Aldershot, in Hampshire, and I've got to say that was about the longest two hours of my life. Sarah didn't talk much. If you asked her any questions, you'd just get a one word answer, and, I swear, she worked hard to find the shortest word she could. She smoked constantly, so we had to ride with the windows down and the van was freezing.

And there was also… I don't know. The oddest smell. It was definitely Sarah. It smelled like a really bad perfume: sharp and faintly floral, but not like any scent I could place. I didn't like it, but it was hardly noticeable through those damned cigarettes. I could tell Toni was having a hard time too. Andy seemed happy enough, but he's one of the most laid-back people I've ever met, so no surprise there.

We got into Aldershot about 8pm and headed toward the old hospital. It took a bit of finding, but eventually we saw it standing there, dark and silent against the night sky. It's a pretty imposing building, the sharp-tipped clocktower above the main hall.

We parked a little way away, just in case there was security that might have stumbled across the van, and walked towards it. As we got closer, I noticed that Sarah was hanging back. I asked her if she was okay, and she just looked at me and said, “You didn’t tell me about this place.”

There was real anger in that voice. I was surprised, not only because that was the most words I’d ever heard her strung together, but also because I’d been really quite detailed about where we were going and the history of the place when I first contacted her.

I said as much, but she just shook her head. I asked if there was going to be a problem, and she paused, lit another cigarette, and gave me a slow shrug. Then without a word she picked up her bag and started walking towards the main building.

Getting inside wasn’t a problem. The ground floor windows were large, and it looked like we weren’t the first trespassers wanting to get inside; a few of the boards covering them had been pried away already. So, we turned on our torches and headed inside.

Now, the particular ghost we were after that episode was a grey lady. There are grey ladies everywhere. I mean, it’s not like it’s an official ghost classification, but if you find somewhere haunted in England, there’s a good chance that one or more of the ghosts will be called “The Grey Lady”. Old hospitals, asylums, orphanages, they’re usually believed to be the ghost of a nurse or something, anywhere that women had a duty.

And the Cambridge Military Hospital was no exception to that. Various old tales of soldiers being visited by an apparition in the night while recuperating on the ward; a few members of the public as it was opened up to the civilian population after the Second World War. They are generally benign encounters, even kind, so we were arguing about whether to try and angle the episode for spookiness, or try and build up a more emotional tale.

Eventually we decided to shoot both sorts for the storytelling and investigation, and then see what happened in terms of phenomena so we could intercut as appropriate. Throughout all of this discussion Sarah was totally silent. She was chain-smoking, casting her torch around slowly and deliberately, as if she was looking for something, and we were constantly having to adjust our shots to avoid her clouds of smoke interfering with the filming. I tried to ignore her, but to be honest she was freaking me out a lot more than the place itself.

So, we started wandering round, recounting the history of the place to camera. We made sure to film any bits of the building that might be creepy enough twice – once with low light in the cold, stark torchlight, then switching out for the warmer bulbs in case we wanted to use the footage for a tragedy angle. The builders had clearly been in already, and marked various areas with spray paint. It was a bit disconcerting, as the shade of red they had used kept making me think that they were blood splashes, so I was leaning towards the ‘creepy old hospital’ angle.

There was also the normal, actual graffiti, of course. Mostly the

standard collection of tags, names, but there was one that stood out. It was in what had eventually become the children's ward; over a mural of Winnie the Pooh, someone had scrawled in black spraypaint the words "Silk will not stitch the butcher's meat". So… yeah, by the end we'd pretty much settled on going for the spooky angle.

We hadn't had any encounters though, so once we'd got the main footage we needed, we headed into the main ward, now a huge, empty room, with only the metal skeleton of curtain runners around the top. We set up the detection equipment, and bedded down for the night. Each of us had a watch, so as to make sure that someone was awake for any contact. I was hesitant to give Sarah a shift, as she'd be acting so strangely the entire time, but when she volunteered for the 2am to 4am shift, y'know, no-one wants that one, I, I couldn't easily say no.

I was on the shift before, and there didn't seem anything much to report. A slight drop in temperature around 1 in the morning, which I filmed, even though in the end we decided not to use that footage. When 2am rolled around, I walked over to where Sarah lay sleeping. She hadn't been smoking for a while, of course, and that weird floral perfume of hers was stronger than ever. I reached out to touch her on the shoulder and wake her up, when she rolled over and looked right at me.

There was no sign of fatigue in her eyes, and I couldn't help but wonder if she'd been asleep at all. Or maybe just lying very, very still. I tried not to think about it as I crawled into my sleeping bag

on the cold hospital floor, and the last thing I heard before I drifted off was the click of Sarah Baldwin's lighter.

I woke up about an hour later. I don't know what woke me, but the others were all still asleep. I realised that I couldn't smell cigarettes, and looking around it appeared Sarah had wandered off. It was almost pitch dark, with only a small amount of moonlight creeping in through the boarded windows. I turned on a torch and checked the readings. There were no spikes in EMF, but it looked like the temperature had dropped sharply about 10 minutes before. I waited for another five minutes, but when Sarah still hadn't returned I started to get a bit worried.

I should have woken the others, but if it turned out she'd just gone to the bathroom, I didn't want to embarrass her in front of everyone. In that case she should have got one of us up to take over watching, anyway, but she'd hardly been the most professional while she was working with us, so it wouldn't have surprised me if she hadn't. After another five minutes, I decided to go look for her.

Maybe the place was getting to me a bit, but all my suspicions about Sarah were making me paranoid. I decided not to take a torch. Instead, I took one of the cameras we weren't using and turned on the night vision setting. Through the viewscreen I was able to see where I was going pretty well.

I started to check the ground floor. The night vision cast everything into stark shapes, and every time I turned the corner it seemed like there was something there, just beyond the range of the camera. I

couldn't see or hear anything, but it was just there. I could feel it.

There was a smell as well, growing stronger. It wasn't cigarette smoke, though, or Sarah's strange perfume. It smelled of copper, with another scent beneath it, acrid and sour, with the faintest hint of ammonia. I'll, I'll admit it, I was scared. Scared enough that I didn't even think about how great the whole thing would have looked in our show. I didn't look into the camera, or provide any commentary, or make any move except keeping a close watch on the display.

As I walked up the stairs towards the upper floor, I began to hear something. It sounded like someone was talking. It was low, quick and desperate, with an edge to it that sounded almost like pleading. It was coming from one of the smaller patient rooms off to the side. I slowly crept towards it, feeling absurd about how terrified I was about being seen.

I reached the door and, using the camera, I peered inside. Sarah was there, with her bag next to her. She was gesticulating wildly and talking, though I couldn't see anyone else in the room with her. I couldn't make out most of it, though I heard the words "trespass" and "unintended" several times, and whispered apologies.

I was almost about to call out to her, when she suddenly stood bolt upright. It seemed like she was struggling to breathe. Then I heard an impact, and Sarah seemed to be flung across the room by a heavy blow. She hit the wall hard, and I heard a crack as she slumped down, a smear of blood left on the wall.

I froze. I didn't know what to do. Part of me wanted to run over and see if she was alright, but I just couldn't bring myself to move. After a second or two, Sarah stirred. She shouted something into the room, this time in a language I didn't understand, and dragged herself to her feet. She removed her jacket and I saw that there was something very wrong with her left arm. Bits of it seemed to be hanging off where it had hit the wall.

She gripped it with her right hand and, er… well, this is where my colleagues would laugh me out of the industry. She peeled off the skin of her left arm. As if she was taking off a glove. I saw it stretch and come away from whatever was beneath. In the camera's small viewscreen I couldn't see what was there, what was underneath, but it was dark and shiny. I will never forget the sound of the skin coming away from her arm.

Once she had taken it off, she stretched it, and then slipped it back over her hand, pulling it until it was tight. She reached into her bag and, from beneath the packets of cigarettes, she pulled out a staple gun. Around the edges of the skin, where it met the rest of her, she slowly and deliberately stapled the skin down.

I don't know why that was the point I ran. I could have left at any time before that, but for some reason **that** was the thing that broke me, and I hurried back to the others as quietly as I could. Sarah returned about fifteen minutes later, and didn't seem to suspect she'd been observed. I lay awake the rest of that night, smelling her cigarette smoke and the traces of her odd floral perfume.

I never asked her about it. I never brought it up with the others. We got whatever daylight shots of the Cambridge Military Hospital we needed almost in silence, though Andy kept trying to strike up a conversation. The journey back was no better. I kept trying to get a look at Sarah's arm, but her jacket sleeves covered them completely. We dropped her off in Sydenham and I never saw her again.

In the end it was actually Toni that asked we not work with Sarah Baldwin again. Apparently she'd gotten "weird vibes" and didn't feel comfortable around her. I agreed, though I didn't share my reasons. The episode came out okay, in the end though, um, though I didn't include anything about what I saw that night.

ARCHIVIST

Interesting. You say you recorded video of the event?

MELANIE

Yeah, I've given your guys a copy, but watching it back, the recording is so distorted that you can't really make anything out.

ARCHIVIST

Hmm. And you're sure you weren't… dreaming?

MELANIE

Are you serious?

ARCHIVIST

I just have to check every possibility. Obviously working in your field, you must have quite a powerful imagination.

MELANIE

Great! Great! I should have known this was a complete waste of my time.

ARCHIVIST

Probably. The only corroborating evidence you have is so badly corrupted as to become almost unusable. But, we will do what investigation we can.

MELANIE

[Acidly] Well, thank you so much.

ARCHIVIST

We'll be in touch if we need anything else.

Statement ends.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

As I mentioned to Ms. King, there is little in this statement by way of information we can follow up. Cambridge Military Hospital is currently in the process of being turned into a housing development, so there is not much to be done in that regard. There are records of a ‘grey lady’ ghost appearing in the past, specifically in the form of a nurse, though none of them come even close to matching this statement in terms of manifestation.

We were unable to track down Sarah Baldwin. The address Ms. King provided in Sydenham has not been occupied for the last six month, and does not list her as a previous tenant. We contacted Georgina Barker, who confirmed that she had worked with Sarah Baldwin on two episodes of her “What the Ghost?” podcast, having previously met her at a networking event. She knew nothing about her personal life and has not seen her since the last episode they worked on.

Neither the phone number or email address received any answer or reply. Still, where do I know the name Sarah Baldwin from? If I have the time, I might go back over some earlier files. See what I can find.

The footage Ms. King provided was just as corrupted as she said, being virtually unwatchable. Just static and distortion. There’s only one or two frames where the quality is sufficient that anything can be made out. It appears to be an empty hospital room, as described. The only point where it differs from Ms. King’s story is that there appear to be two figures in the shot, rather than just the one. The first seems to be kneeling, and matches the description of Sarah

Baldwin. The other figure is much taller, and appears to be pointing, though no features can be made out, it does not appear to be touching the ground.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG029 - Cheating Death

Statement #9720406

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Nathaniel Thorp, regarding his own mortality. Original statement given June 4th, 1972. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Are you interested in folktales at all? I know I'm here to provide a statement of my own experience, and I will, but there's something so revealing in the stories that grow up in a culture, wouldn't you say? And I promise it will be relevant by the end. I can guarantee it's not in your library, either, because as far as I know this story has never been written down. I'd do it myself, but there's a reason you're having to write this for me. One of these days I'll get around to learning my letters. Probably.

But I'll still wager, illiterate or not, that I can tell you a story you haven't heard before, though the themes are some that dance their way through many of the oldest folklore you can find: death. And

games of chance. Well, if you want to win, anyway. Unless you fancy your chances of beating it at chess. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Once there was a soldier. A bold soldier. The sort you could find in any army, in any war, at any time. Fond of drink, fond of dice, fond of whatever nocturnal pleasures might be offered. He was bold as brass, yet bold is not the same as brave, and rarely did he take to the field of battle without somehow finding himself at the rear of the charge, where cannon and musket ball were less likely to find him. As I say, he could have been fighting anywhere, but this story is in New England, during the time of the Revolutionary War. Whether he was British or American or even French, it means nothing. What matters, is that at the Battle of Bunker Hill he found himself alone.

The night before had been wasted hard carousing, and what money he had not lost betting on faro had quickly been spent on drinking and pleasant company. So it was that he took to the field of battle with his head already swimming and eyes a stinging red. He had neglected even to bring gunpowder enough to reload his rifle, having filled his pouch instead with playing cards, and with every boom of the cannon the soldier's head pulsed in such pain that he thought himself shot.

The smoke was coiled thick around him and the acrid stench of gunpowder and blood made him retch. He fired his one and only shot and it disappeared into the roiling fog of war. He tried to advance, but he did not know which way was towards the enemy,

nor could he see any others amidst the chaos of battle, enemy or comrade. For all the muskets and cannons he could hear, it seemed he was alone. As he stood there, the soldier saw that some of the blood that fell into the sodden soil was his own. When he had been shot, he had no idea, but the pain that surged through him as he touched his wounded chest left no doubt.

The bold soldier considered returning to his lines, to find a doctor, but he remembered all too clearly the mouldering filth of the medical tents, the ranks of infected fools wailing out their last doomed cries. He would not die like that. He would not choke out some feeble plea for his mother in some grime-encrusted infirmary. He turned, threw down his rifle, and began to run. He did not know in which direction he was going, and simply prayed that it was not towards the enemy or the sea. Blood flowed freely from the ragged wound in his chest, and his breathing was laboured, yet he pushed on. He ran until the mud turned to soil and the soil turned to grass, until the smoke turned to fog and the fog turned to rain, and dusk came upon him.

Despite the balmy warmth of that June day, the night was bitterly cold. Perhaps it was the rain that pounded upon his tunic, or maybe it was the beginnings of a fever, but when the soldier finally stopped running, he was so chilled that it took all the energy he had left in him not to collapse. He was soaked through, shivering violently, and very aware that if he did not find somewhere to take shelter from the elements, he was going to die. And not a quick, clean death from a pistol or a sabre. A miserable, shivering death in

some barren field near Boston. The soldier, whose boldness seemed to seep out with his blood, did not want to die.

And here there is something to be said on death. Everyone fears death. Of course they do. Even the most devout must have some apprehension, for however confident they are in a life everlasting with their deity of choice, the concept of eternity is one that the mortal mind recoils from. Be it bliss, torment or the senseless void, none can actually imagine what it is to die, so it's only right that all should have a healthy fear of it. There are some, though, for whom it is an enduring terror. Who cannot even consider the inevitable termination of life without a deepest panic, and can think of nothing in life that could be worse than its end. The soldier was of this cloth, and upon feeling his time drawing to a close, he began to cast about in fear.

He spied a farmhouse, dark and uninviting. The fighting nearby had likely scared off whoever lived there. Desperate to get out of the pouring rain, the soldier tried the doors, and found them locked tight. He broke a window, but with his wound he did not have the strength to climb inside. In despair, he looked around himself for another entrance and spied the cellar door. It was not locked, and lifted with surprising ease, given how heavy the wood appeared. He collapsed inside, half-crawling, half-falling down the rough earthen steps, until he found himself lying there in the dark, dry warmth of the basement.

The soldier lay there for some time, unmoving, eyes shut. Listening to the driving New England rain beating down outside. He breathed

deeply, ignoring the pain from his wounded chest, and tried to gather his thoughts. What was important, he considered briefly, was that at that moment, he was not dead.

It was then he caught the scent of damp. Not the damp of wet earth after a hot day, but the cold damp of vaults and catacombs, slick with mould and glimmering nitre. You would have expected Death to smell of decay, of rotting flesh and maggot meat, but it did not. And the soldier knew what it was immediately. Even before his eyes adjusted to the dark and looked to the table. Before he saw the figure that sat there in a moth-eaten monk's robe. There was no reason to assume that what he saw was Death, and not simply some forgotten corpse, but there was no doubt in the soldier's mind when he gazed upon it that he saw his doom embodied. Then it turned to look at the soldier, and what little resolve remained fled from his heart. He tried to run, but he got barely two steps before he collapsed again. Death waited patiently.

To describe it as a skeleton would be to do Death a disservice. For though the robe that sat in that chair contained only bones, it was not the skeleton that moved. It was Death. The bones were old, so ancient and brittle that the slightest pressure or movement would have rendered them down to dust. They did move; Death was no more a skeleton than you are a woollen suit. Above all it was old. Older than you could possibly dream.

And the soldier began to weep. He cried and begged Death not to take him, but Death was silent.

Now, as long as there have been people and games, there have been tales of those who gambled with Death. Some as metaphor, some as myth, but the soldier had heard enough of these tales to make his own last, desperate gamble, and he challenged Death to a game. There was silence for several long minutes before it nodded its head.

Reaching into its robe, Death pulled out three things: a chess knight, a domino and a pair of dice, each scrimshawed out of old bone. The choice presented was clear, but the soldier had enough wit about him to shake his head and reach into his pouch. He laid the cards upon the table, and asked Death if he knew how to play faro. Death paused, as though considering, before it nodded. “Very well,” it said, “and if you win, you shall not die.”

He replaced his totems within the mouldering robe, and pulled out instead a small hexagonal faro token, likewise made of bone. The soldier, starting to feel bold again as the wood of the table warped and decayed into the thirteen cards of a faro board, pushed it to the side and told Death, with the faintest hint of a smile, that he had brought his own. From somewhere, Death produced a dealing box and, placing the playing cards within it, it began to deal.

Faro, or ‘Bucking the Tiger’ as the carnival hawkers would have it, is not a complicated game. Bets are placed upon the cards and the dealer draws one card for the players and one for themselves. Bets matching the player’s card are doubled, bets matching the dealer’s cards are lost. There are a few other rules, of course, but if played honestly, then there is no betting game with fairer odds. The soldier

had never before encountered an honest game.

He had before him a small pile of ivory sticks, not unlike those used for betting in mah-jongg, though the soldier had no knowledge of such a game. He knew that if his pile was gone, then his life was forfeit.

The game was slow and deliberate, and the soldier could not have said if they played for hours, for days or for months. The night outside showed no sign of ending, nor did the rain cease its drumming out a rhythm on the still open cellar door. The cards were placed slowly and deliberately by Death, and the soldier became more and more amazed with the revelation that this was the least crooked game of faro he had ever played. Still, there was little scope to cheat, as there was none of the shouting or crowds that served as a distraction in every gambling parlour. The relentless hollow gaze of the collapsing holes of Death's skull were enough to keep the soldier almost from pushing his luck too far.

Then at last it reached what looked to be the final play. The deck was almost exhausted, and all the soldier had was piled upon the number three. As his reserve had dwindled, the soldier felt the wound in his chest begin to pulse with a dull ache, as thick beads of sweat rolled down his shivering face. If the final three came up for the dealer, he had lost, but if it came up for him, then he would finish the game with a higher stack than Death. Perhaps that would be enough for him to win? The rules of the wager had not been clearly explained, but as the shivering began to overtake him, the soldier clutched to this faint hope. And as Death reached its hand

for the final cards, he placed his copper upon his pile, the six-sided token that reversed the bet. Now it was, if Death drew the three as the dealer's card, he would win.

Death turned the card to reveal… a King, and reached for the next one.

The soldier knew that he had made a mistake. When the three was turned, he would lose his bet and lose everything. He had only one chance, one thin sliver of hope, and even that would no doubt simply damn him further. But what else could he do? As Death turned its head towards the faro box to draw the next card, the soldier, in one practiced move, took the thin length of twine wrapped around his thumb and through the tiny, drilled hole in his copper, and pulled it taut. With an almost imperceptible flick of the wrist he pulled it back and into his hand, removing it from the board and leaving his bet to win when the three was drawn.

The terror that gripped him when Death returned its gaze to the board was deeper than any he had ever known. Every other time he had attempted that trick, the baying of the crowd and the heaving mass of patrons placing bets afforded him ample cover, yet in the stillness and dark, with just him and his endless opponent playing their game, there was surely no way such a move could go unnoticed. Death turned the card over: the Three of Spades.

It gazed at the card, then at the small pile of ivory in front of the soldier. It made no sound, and the soldier could not tell if what he heard was the rain falling outside or the beating of his own heart.

Finally, Death nodded its head, and pushed its own pile of bone sticks towards the soldier.

“You win.”

Its tone was almost… happy. The soldier didn’t notice, as at these words a thrill went through his heart. He had beaten Death. He was going to live. He stood up, still giddy and feverish, but with such joy that he nigh on collapsed from the laughter that exploded from his lips. He staggered to the cellar door, expecting to see the sunrise after so long waiting in the dark, but the sky was still black. Behind him, Death waited.

The soldier noticed the pain in his chest was gone, and took in a lungful of air. It was cold, damp, and tinged with a faint whiff of something metallic. It was only then he really noticed the low, rumbling laugh that came from Death. He turned to see the figure still sat at the table, but now the old monk’s robes were soaked with blood. The bones of the figure were red and dripping, with patches of muscle appearing over them.

Then he felt it in himself. Something was very wrong. An itching, burning deep within him, then a flash of intense pain in his arm. He grabbed it instinctively, but where he touched it, the skin and flesh beneath it came away in his hand, like chunks of wet bread. Beneath it, he could see the yellow-white of bone. His bone. Old bone.

And the soldier began to scream.

As more of his body sloughed off of him into crimson piles upon the floor, he looked up at where Death had sat. In its place he saw an old monk, bloody but whole, smiling at him. The soldier held out a now bony hand towards him in supplication: “You said that if I won, then I’d live!”

The monk shook his head. “No, I didn’t.”

The end, I suppose. Thank you for indulging me, you’ve been very patient. I’m well aware I came in to tell you my own story, and instead have rattled off some old folktale, which you’ve dutifully taken down. I do feel now, though, that I’m at a place where I can tell you of myself. But for one final bit of context, I need you to watch this. Pay attention.

ARCHIVIST

Archivist’s note: After this point the rest of the page is covered in what appears to be a large bloodstain. The statement resumes on the page afterwards, in a somewhat shakier hand.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Apologies for that. A bit dramatic, I know, but I always feel a demonstration is best in these situations. Are you feeling better now? Well, regardless, I think I should continue; best get this down before someone comes to check on your scream. I’ve no interest in becoming a resident medical marvel.

So yes, this is not a trick knife. You can check yourself if you want.

Hell, stab me yourself if you care to. No? Fine. Perhaps I underestimated your curiosity.

After I won my game of faro, I spent almost two centuries in that unhallowed state. I remember little of that time. I was not the only one, nor was I the sole embodiment of Death. There were others, I think, in a similar state to me. I don't know how many, but we didn't come for everyone. I don't know how we chose our victims, or whether we were at the whims of a higher power. I call them victims, as while we visited many a terminal or doomed soul, we did not only visit those whose time had come. Some of them we killed ourselves. I remember my bone-sharp hands reaching into the throats of the old, the young, those who deserved it, and those who brought nothing but love to the world.

Some would choose to gamble, of course. The foolish ones chose chess. I was a master of every game, knew every rule. To select the one game with no luck in it at all was always folly. In the end, it was roulette that released me. Luck bended in my favour when I played with victims, but with a game so pure in random chance as roulette, well, eventually, luck comes around, though I had to wait damn near two centuries for it to do so. I'll never forget the look on that old man's face when he won, and began to feel the change overtake him.

So now I'm here, and I cannot die. I can barely live, either. Food and drink make me sick, and I cannot sleep. There is an aching inside of me. A craving for something, but I don't know what. I don't seem to age, but I've only been flesh again for a few years, so

can’t be sure of this. I have often wondered about whether I’m the only one like me in the world. I can’t be. It doesn’t make sense. I know there were others. But I don’t know where.

I can’t decide whether this existence I find myself in is better than the death I feared so long ago. I sometimes wonder, but have decided that it is. A living hell is, after all, still living.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

I’ve had the blood checked, and it appears to be real. O Negative. And that’s about as far as I can confirm anything about this statement, forty-four years after the fact. The details Mr. Thorp provided on his residence, occupation, et cetera, appear to have been accurate for the time, but we’ve been unable to track down any up-to-date information on him, if he even still lives.

Fiona Law, the research assistant who took the statement, passed away in 2003 from complications following a liver transplant, and with two exceptions no-one else working for the Institute at the time is still employed here. Gertrude Robinson was there, of course, but we can’t exactly ask her, and Elias was working as a filing clerk at the time. I followed up with him, and he does remember there being something of a commotion around that time about someone self-harming while giving a statement – rumours said they’d cut off their finger or something – but he wasn’t directly involved and didn’t know much more about it.

Aside from that, it's almost a complete dead end. The only other thing in the file can't really be considered a lead, especially as it's now gone. It was a small, hexagonal token, about an inch in diameter. There were no markings on it, but it appeared to be made of very old bone. I was unable to determine anything further, as when I picked it up, it simply crumbled to dust in my hand. Perhaps that's fitting.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG030 – Killing Floor

Statement #0130111

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of David Laylow, regarding his time working at an industrial abattoir near Dalston. Original statement given September the 1st, 2013. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I used to work at a slaughterhouse. A ‘meat processing plant’. I won’t say which one. I don’t want to get in any trouble. It was up near Dalston, though, so you can probably figure it out. Not so many around out there as to make it hard. Not so many around anywhere. It’s not something most folks want nearby. It smells awful if you’re not used to it and people tell me they get a weird vibe. I never did, at least not before all this happened. Maybe that says something about me, though.

There’s not so much difference between people and animals, you know? Not saying that I’d be keen to kill a person, or that humans

are all stupid. No, I'm saying that animals are smarter than you give them credit for. They look dumb, sure, but I know what I'm talking about when I say that every damn animal in that place knew exactly why they were there. You don't need to be smart to know when you're surrounded by your own mutilation.

When I first started I did a lot of the driving, and right from loading them up, you can hear it in their whining. They know what's going on, they know where they're going. I've heard a lot of engineering and science types talk about "stressors", "novelty" or "cortisol levels" when discussing how best to avoid "triggering fear or flight responses". If it lets them keep enjoying their steak, they can use whatever words they want to, but every wide-eyed cow I've ever put into a squeeze chute knows exactly where that ride ends.

You hear grisly tales about the torment of animals in the slaughterhouse, and the things done to them by the cold, relentless machinery, but so often the casual human brutality is overlooked. A worker and an abattoir are rated on many things, and one of them is how cruel or distressing they are for the livestock passing through. If you're abusive to your animals, you won't get as high a rating, but that's about it. You're not going to lose your job unless you really overstep the line, and sometimes you have a bad day. The sort of day that it feels good to work out on a bit of pig flesh, as it goes towards its end.

I mean, I wouldn't really have said that sort of cruelty was common beyond the occasional kick or sometimes using an electric prod when it wasn't needed. It was just that, if you did see it, you didn't

care. And you knew that no-one would care if they saw you do it. For all the braying and whining and screaming, in the end it was all just noisy meat.

Weirdest thing is, you start to kind of see people as meat too. Not in a food sort of way, you know. I don't wanna eat my co-workers. It's just that, when you spend all day taking these living, breathing creatures – animals that move and cry and tremble in fear – and you turn them into lifeless blocks of dead flesh, it's hard to believe in any special spark that makes us humans any different. We run and shout and file on through our lives as simply as any cow, and after a while you can't help but realise that we could turn into a lifeless carcass just as easily. Easier, even, given how much smaller we are. I mean, I'm not some weird killer or anything, but after a while it's hard not to see everyone as moving meat.

I used to work on the killing floor, you know? Not long. You're not allowed to work on it for long. In your whole life, I mean. I don't know what the exact amount of time you're allowed to do it for is, but it's pretty short. I only worked it for a few months, and now I can't work on any killing floor anywhere. Ever. It's actually a weight lifted, the knowledge you don't have to do it anymore, but you're still there, aren't you? It's not like you've left the slaughterhouse. I heard once that those rules came in after they did some research in America. This must have been sixty years back now, but they started to look into the crime and murder rates of abattoir workers who manned the killing floor. Of the people who'd worked the killing floor for over ten years, do you know what

percentage went on to commit murder? One hundred percent.

I don't know if that's true. Tony Mulholland told it to me once, when he quit the place. Maybe he was just trying to mess with my head or make a point, but it feels right. I mean, I only did it for a few months, but you kill enough things that don't want to be killed and you start to look at a person's head and wonder where you'd need to place the bolt gun.

I'm sorry, I know this isn't why I'm here, I just feel like I've got to try and make you understand what it's like, killing things and butchering their flesh for a living. I mean, I don't do it anymore, obviously. Still, you've got to understand where I'm coming from.

It all started on the killing floor. I was in charge of the bolt gun. Technically, the animals we slaughter are killed by bleeding them out, something about the meat quality, I think, but it's the bolt gun that means they don't notice. They call it "stunning", but that's never sat quite right with me. You drive a bolt right into the animal's brain, destroying just the right part of it so that they can be bled without resistance, and apparently without pain. I've only ever done the stunning; I've never been on the bleed crew, so I guess in some ways you could say I've never actually killed any of the animals. And sure, maybe they might still have a bit of movement in them after the bolt, and maybe their heart still beats, but for all they talk about "stunning" or "irreversible brain damage", pulling that trigger sure felt like killing to me.

There was another man who worked the floor, bleeding the

animals. His name was Tom Haan, and I had never really spoken to him. For the longest time I wasn't even sure how much English he spoke – he was from China, I think, and hardly ever said a word. The first time I really heard his voice was that day, the day it all started. I'd been feeling strange about work ever since I started on the killing floor, and had finally asked to be moved positions. Now, the official company policy was that any request to leave the killing floor has to be granted, but in practice no-one asks to be moved. It shows a weakness that most of the people working there aren't comfortable with. I did it anyway, and had just received word that, from the following day, I was being moved to butchering the carcasses. I don't remember how I felt. My feelings weren't really working back then.

Anyway, it was as I was processing the last of the cows for that day that Tom Haan came over. I didn't really pay him much attention, but he leaned close, gripped my shoulder and said to me in perfect English, "You cannot stop slaughter by closing the door." I felt a chill pass through me, and I wanted to turn round and demand to know what he was talking about, but he'd already returned to the bleeding crew. I was a bit shaken for the rest of the day, and knowing that these were the last animals I'd need to actually kill made each pull of the trigger harder, not easier. I just turned off my mind and let my mechanical motions take over. Cow into the holding pen, lock its head in place, gun against temple, pull the trigger. Over and over again, until I felt like I was almost in a trance.

It was the silence that finally brought me back to myself. I was waiting for the next in the line of cattle to be herded into the room, and I noticed that I couldn't hear anything. There wasn't the scared lowing of the animals, the far-off whine of saws or the rumble of any one of the hundreds of machines that hum and churn to keep the abattoir running. I waited and waited, but no more cows came. Looking around I couldn't see anyone. There was no clock in that room, nor did I wear a watch. A buzzer would usually sound when breaks rolled around, and I hadn't heard anything.

No more cattle seemed to be coming, so I put down the bolt gun, and walked over towards the bleeding area. There was nobody there, and more than that, the place looked clean. Spotless. As though no blood had ever been spilled there. Had I stood there, passed out or something? Had the day ended and the place been cleaned and I hadn't even noticed?

I headed towards the exit door, deciding that I'd either find someone to ask what was happening, or I'd just go home. The door opened onto a corridor that I didn't recognise. It looked like any other corridor in the slaughterhouse, except that it wasn't the one that led towards the exit. I went to try the other doors that led out of the killing floor, but none of them went to the places I remembered them going. Behind each was another hallway that seemed to lead deeper into the abattoir. I stood there for a few moments, and I genuinely pinched myself. I had to be dreaming or hallucinating or something. It wasn't a dream, though, or a vision. Everything had changed, and I was somewhere new.

I surprised myself a bit with how quickly I accepted this situation. I went out the door I originally went towards, thinking that if I didn't know the layout of this building, then I might as well start by trying to follow the old route out as much I could. The corridors just seemed to lead into each other, though, and soon I was completely lost. I did notice, though, that some of them appeared to have rails along the top, like those used to move the hanging carcasses. Some of them even had hooks on, shiny and clean. These rails would never normally follow the passages of the slaughterhouse like this, and that fact bothered me, though I'm not quite sure why.

I called out, at least at first, hoping that there was someone, somewhere in this maze, who might hear me and answer. There was nothing. Some doors led into empty rooms, containing only still clean machinery. Meat-bone separators, splitting saws, scald tanks, each standing there, shining and silent. Waiting. I didn't hang around long in those rooms. As I said, I don't wear a watch, so I don't know how long I wandered. It felt like hours, though.

Eventually, I turned a corner to see a small, metal staircase spiralling upwards. I had no reason to think I was below ground level at all, but it was the first thing I had found that wasn't just twisting corridors and silent rooms, so I went up. The stairs curved upwards for a very long time.

When I reached the next floor, my heart sank to see more corridors stretching away from me, though these ones all had the meat rails snaking along the ceilings, and many of them were unlit. I stayed out of the darker passages. One of them had a window looking out,

and all I could see outside was a metal abattoir roof stretching away to the horizon. The sky was a dull pink – the colour of blood being washed into a drain. I left the window very quickly. Finally, by complete chance, I noticed a door I recognised. It was the dark green exit door that should lead out of the building. I didn't even stop to consider that it might not lead outside; I just opened it and stepped through.

My feet didn't land on the tarmac of the outside. They didn't land on the concrete or metal or tile of the slaughterhouse floor, either. It was dark, so I didn't immediately realise what I was treading on, except that it shifted slightly under my weight. I looked to either side, and saw the metal barriers penning me in, and the conveyor belt beneath me began to move. I realised where I was, where it would lead, and I screamed.

Turning to run, I almost expected a horde of cattle behind me, pressing me onwards as the runs are designed to make them, but there was nothing there, and I fled out the door. I slammed it behind me and… and I began to cry. It was like something numb within me had shattered, and I couldn't… I just couldn't.

It was as I sat there, collapsed against the wall, that I started to smell it. The coppery-sweet scent of blood. It had a strange sort of comfort to it, as it was the smell of the slaughterhouse as I had known it, before I found my way to wherever I was now. I began to follow it, just walking along, turning wherever the odour of blood was strongest. And it did get stronger, much stronger. As I turned corners and walked through dark rooms, the smell became thick,

pungent, far more than it had ever been before. By the time I stood outside the dull steel door it came from, I could barely breath. From the other side came a loud, mechanical churning. I shouldn't have opened it, but where else was I going to go?

It led to a small catwalk, around the edge of a large, circular room. No, large doesn't do it justice. It was… immense. I could barely see the other side of it, far in the distance. All around the edges were the ends of conveyor belts, and I could see butchered carcasses rolling off them, feeding into the vast pit that took up the rest of the room. The pile of stinking, bloody bodies, more than I could count. Pigs, cattle, sheep, I think I even saw a few humans in the pile, though without heads or limbs it's hard to tell the difference between them and pigs. The vast heap shifted and moved, as something mechanical far below chewed through it, but it was always being topped up, fed by those conveyor belts, carcasses falling limply on top of each other like dolls. I couldn't see the bottom, though whatever was processing the pile was so loud as to almost drown out my thoughts.

What else could I do, but turn around once again, and run?

I don't have the faintest idea how long I ran for. All I know is that eventually I fell to my knees in the dark and I lay there for a while. The sound and smell of the pit had faded away, and I began to hear another sound, the chunking thud of a bolt gun. At this point I was just about sick of following strange noises and smells around that goddamn place, so I turned around and started walking the other way. It didn't help. Whichever way I went, the sound just seemed to

get louder, echoing through the empty hallways.

When I opened the door back onto the killing floor, I just didn't have any surprise left inside of me. Sitting there, in front of the stunning box, was Tom Haan. He was facing away from me, but I could see him, slowly and deliberately, placing the bolt gun against different parts of himself – his legs, his stomach, his shoulders – and pulling the trigger. By the time I reached him, he was little more than a mass of bleeding wounds. He mutely handed me the bolt gun and I took it. With his one working hand, he guided my arm until the gun rested against the centre of his forehead. But he didn't make me fire it. I did that myself. He fell limp to the floor. I don't know if he was dead, but I hope so. I'd hate it if that place had to bleed him.

The door behind him led to a corridor I recognised, and the next door I found marked 'Exit' opened to a sunny day so bright that I could barely see. There were people there, other workers, but no-one paid me any attention. I left the slaughterhouse, and didn't go back. I kept expecting the police to call me about Tom, but I never heard his name mentioned again. Not even when I handed in my resignation. I wish I felt bad about his death, but I don't. I don't feel anything at all.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Hmm. More meat. Interesting. I had Sasha do some basic

corroboration of the particulars of Mr. Laylow's tale, and everything appears to be more or less accurate. He was employed by Aver Meats in Dalston from April 2010 to the 12th of July 2013, at which point left his post, which was confirmed to be the stunning the cattle for processing, in the middle of his shift, along with Thomas Haan, one of his colleagues. They left through the main entrance, ignoring the other workers, though no-one reported them acting strangely aside from that. Neither returned to the abattoir, and Tom Haan has not been seen since.

We contacted Mr. Laylow for a follow-up statement, which he gave readily enough, though it largely deals with his lingering problems eating meat, which I would say are symptoms of PTSD, but he has strongly declined to seek treatment.

Tim and Martin had a bit more luck investigating Tom Haan, though only really enough to confirm that he seems to have completely vanished following his departure from Aver Meats on the 12th of July. No missing person report was filed, and he appears to have had no friends or family. The landlord of the house he rented in Walthamstow, claims that the last rent he received from Haan was at the beginning of July. This landlord was quite put out when he disappeared, as apparently he had been renting a house in Clarence Road for almost a decade, and it was in quite a state of disrepair when he left.

Immigration authorities are somewhat useless. They have informed us that he missed a meeting with his advisor later that year, but it wasn't until October, so gives us little to go on. His bank account

has also registered no activity since July the 6th. No official effort has been made to locate him, and the police were reluctant to open a new case, so we didn't push it.

There's little else to be looked into, as Mr. Laylow's description of an endless slaughterhouse is, to put it generously, unverifiable. That said, there have recently been moves by Aver Meats to extend their Dalston plant. They have planning permission, but are apparently having trouble retaining builders, four of which have already quit. Only one of them, Darren Lacey, agreed to talk to us, but all he would say to Tim was that the building "already seemed to be way too big." And he said he couldn't get over the smell of blood.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG031 – First Hunt

Statement #0100912

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Lawrence Mortimer, regarding his hunting trip to Blue Ridge, Viginia. Original statement given December 9th, 2010. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I always wanted to go hunting. It always seemed such a manly sort of pursuit. I mean, killing the deer or elk or whatever else was always beside the point; it was just the idea of setting off into the wild, surviving out there, cooking and eating what you kill – it all sounded like such an adventure. I mean, I'd thought about trying it in this country, but shooting pheasants with shotguns and riding down foxes all seemed too much the domain of, uh, nitwits in tweed. So, if I was going to go hunting, I would need to go to another country to do it. Somewhere where they had a few animals worth going after. Thinking about it, I suppose that is what happened in the end, in a perverse sort of way. And it did cost poor

Arden his life.

Well, my desire to go hunting was always something of a ‘someday’ project. I’m sure you know what I mean: those ideas you have, holidays you plan to do ‘sometime in the future’, but they’re never time-dependent and usually you just keep putting them off for more pressing things. So when I turned fifty back in February, I thought, ‘dash it all, I’m going to go hunting before I drop dead!’ When I told my friends they all thought I’d gone loopy, but I just reminded them that it isn’t just the young that can be impetuous and daft.

Anyway, over the past few years I’d become great friends with an American. Arden Neeli was his name. We’d met on a sceptics message board and got on like a house on fire. When I mentioned I was looking into impetuous hunting trips, he asked how averse I was to hiking. I said not at all, I’ve always been a very active sort, and he told me that in Virginia, his home state, there were a lot of excellent places to go hunting, providing I didn’t mind waiting until October or November. I wasn’t exactly expecting the Grim Reaper to come knocking in the intervening months, so I told him it sounded lovely.

We spent a good long while discussing it, and finally decided to take a three day hike into Blue Ridge on the Appalachian Trail, and see if we could find a deer or an elk for me to shoot. Nature, seclusion and guns – to my ears it sounded just perfect.

So, early last month I packed my bags and caught a plane over to Virginia. The weather was cold but otherwise pleasant, and to be

honest I was surprised how similar it felt to Torquay in November. I normally live in Torquay. I think I put that on your form there. If I did, it won't hurt you to have it written down twice. I wasn't, however, fully prepared to meet Arden in person. I'd never met an Internet friend in real life before, and he was far louder and more outgoing than I was prepared for, based on the well thought-out and considerate communications we had previously exchanged. He kept laughing at everything I said as though it was a joke, even when it wasn't a joke, and would not stop going on about my accent.

Still, all was forgiven when he showed me his gun cabinet. They were beautiful, and while I'm a member of a few shooting clubs over here, you've always got to keep your rifles under lock and key, hidden away out of sight. To see a dozen, well-cared for weapons displayed proudly, well, it was just lovely.

We set out the following day, driving up to Blue Ridge from his home in Richmond. It took some time to get there, as everything is so much further apart in America, but we parked at Crabtree Falls shortly after midday. We had our tents and our supplies. I was very excited to don my hunters orange, and to take up my rifle. I was carrying a Winchester M70, which I had read was very good for beginners, while Arden carried a Remington Model 673, his preferred firearm, which he talked about to me at great length. And off we went up the trail.

Our first day was unsuccessful. I was something of a blundering presence, and though Arden was at pains to assure me that our

failure was simply due to being too close to a road, I was sure that it was my own crashing footsteps scaring away the creatures. I mean, we hadn't gone far compared to our proposed route, but we were already several miles from the nearest road.

As the day wore on, we began to look for somewhere to set up camp. We were attempting to "Leave No Trace", as the Americans say, so we were likely going to set our tents up on the trail itself, but as we began to get them out I heard the strangest thing. It sounded like somebody whistling, a slow version of *The Farmer in the Dell* or, as I believe it's more commonly known, *A-Hunting We Shall Go*.

I looked over, and by the expression of puzzlement on Arden's face it was clear he heard it as well. I was just about to call out to whoever was whistling, when a figure wandered very casually through the treeline and onto the trail. He walked out of thick woodland as though he were strolling down a promenade. He was short and lean, with long, shaggy black hair and a slightly unkempt goatee. His clothes were the rugged, durable sort you'd expect to see on a hiker, but he had no jacket or coat. He carried no backpack or kit of any sort. In fact it seemed like he was just wandering through the woods with the clothes on his back.

Arden was quicker to pick up on this than I was and asked the man if he needed any help. The hiker stared at him for several long seconds, as though trying to deduce something, then smiled and said, "No". I didn't like that smile one bit. Far too many teeth to it, I'd say. He asked us where we were heading, how long we were on

the trail for. There was something ever so slightly odd about his intonation, and he dragged the Rs somehow when he spoke. We answered as vaguely as we could without being rude, since neither of us felt comfortable near this man.

The hiker shrugged, and started to walk across the trail, between us. As he did so, he paused for a second, and took a deep breath, and it seemed for all the world like he was sniffing us. Then he said something, I forget exactly. “Tomorrow will be a good day for a run,” or something like that. And then he just started whistling again, and wandered off into the forest behind us. I think both myself and Arden wanted to stop him, it was so clear something wasn’t right with the situation, but we were both… astounded with his manner and I don’t think either of us could have thought of how to do so. And then he was gone.

I needn’t tell you that sleep came difficult. The sounds of the forest at night were far louder than I had ever heard them back home, and every cracking branch, every rustle of leaves, set my nerves on edge. It was an overcast night, and outside the tent was almost completely dark. Around two o’clock in the morning I could have sworn that I heard someone laugh, slow and softly, outside my tent. It sounded like it was right by my head, just the other side of the thin nylon wall. By the time I’d managed to get up the courage to check, of course, there was nobody there.

The next day we packed up the camp and set off hunting again, donning our lurid orange vests and rifles. I must admit, I felt ten times better with the weight of the gun in my arms, and was

inclined to put the events of the night before behind me. In fact, after a morning spent walking and joking and, on two occasions, damn near bagging an elk, I thought we were both having a splendid time.

It was about four in the afternoon, the sun just starting to begin its descent towards an early autumn dusk, when I saw **my** elk. I don't know why, but when I saw him through the trees I knew that he was mine. I told Arden and we started to creep towards it very slowly. He had been teaching me since yesterday, and it wasn't long before I had my position, and raised my gun. I sighted it just below the ear, and there was a moment, when its head turned right towards me. I could have sworn it looked me in the eye as I prepared to pull the trigger.

A gunshot rang out, but it was not from my gun. The elk startled and ran, and I spun round, but Arden was nowhere to be seen. The shot still echoed through the trees, but he seemed to have vanished. I began to search frantically for him. Had he… Had he been lured away by an elk of his own? Had he been accidentally shot by some other hunters? I called out his name, but there was no reply.

Eventually, after several minutes of desperate searching, I came to a small clearing. There, slumped against one of the trees was Arden. He was dead. The tree behind him was painted in a spray of crimson, and there was a messy hole in the centre of his throat, as though it had been torn out entirely. His rifle lay next to him on the ground, also coated in blood. It seems silly to say now, but my first thought was to check his pulse. So I put my gun down to do so.

Obviously he didn't have one, but I couldn't understand what was happening. I'd been with him not three minutes before and he had been alive and unharmed. It didn't make sense.

Then I heard that whistling. That infernal whistling from the treeline. I turned and there was the hiker. His right hand was coated in Arden's blood, and he grinned at me. Then he began to sprint. His speed was incredible, and he loped from side to side with a sort of zigzag motion. I ran. I know I should have picked up my gun, but you can't understand just how frightening it is to have something like that, a true predator, running at you full pelt. Your death charging towards you like a freight train. You can't understand what it is to be prey. So I ran.

I turned tail, leaving my pack and my gun behind, and sprinted into the woods. I didn't look back, I couldn't. It took all my concentration to keep my footing, to not trip. I could hear him occasionally behind me, as he charged through a bush or scratched against a tree. I think he did it deliberately, you know. To let me know he was still there. There's no way I could have won that footrace, but I think he must have been toying with me. After a while I could no longer hear him directly behind me, so I slowed to catch my breath. I'm in good shape, as I say, but I'm not a young man and I was dizzy with the exhaustion.

I sat there, so intent on listening out for any sign of danger, of this man, that I barely even noticed night fall. There were no clouds that night, and I was glad, since I had left my torch along with my pack. If I was to run at all during the night, I would need the

moonlight to see by. Of course, any experienced hiker would tell you never to travel the woods at night, and certainly not to run through them, but I hardly had any choice if it came to it. And of course it did. The night was barely half an hour old when I heard it again, that… whistling, then the words floating through the trees, but with a low, bass tone to them. “A-hunting we shall go, A-hunting we shall go”.

And once again I ran. By all rights I should have broken my neck, charging off into the darkness like that. I should have tripped on a root or put my foot in a rabbit hole. I should have at least twisted my ankle. Somehow this didn’t happen, though; I ran and ran and, well, I just kept running. It didn’t seem to do me any good, of course. I was still far slower in the dark than I had been during the day, and it was obvious my pursuer could easily outpace me if he wanted to. So many times I’d hear that song coming from in front of me, and turned sharply to avoid it, until I was utterly lost.

Finally, I broke through the treeline. I thought at first I’d found another clearing, but looking down, I saw I was next to Arden’s mutilated body. The wretched thing had just sent me in a circle. For fun. For the chase. I was tired, scared, covered in scratches and bruises over my entire body, and for nothing. I was still going to die.

I turned to face my fate, and for the first time that night got a good look at my hunter. The moonlight shone on him in full and what I saw was not human. It’s hard to describe exactly, but everything about him was sharper. His fingers, his teeth, his face, his eyes. His

skin.

As I looked at him, the strangest thing popped into my head. Have you ever read *The Duchess of Malfi?* I had to study it for my O-Levels, many years ago. Dreadful play, as I remember, the worst sort of old revenge tragedy, all incest and murder and madness. But there's a line that stays with me, a doctor diagnosing the Duchess' brother with lycanthropy. As I recall it goes, "Once met the duke, 'bout midnight in a lane behind St. Mark's church, with the leg of a man upon his shoulder. Said he was a wolf. Only difference was, a wolf's skin is hairy on the outside, his on the inside". Looking at this thing that wanted to kill me, it's the only way it's the only description that feels right.

He didn't charge this time, but slowly stalked towards me. I was… acutely aware of the loaded guns by my feet, but I'd seen how fast it could move and I didn't rate my chances. It got close. Close enough that I could smell the foetid breath. Close enough that I could see the most disturbing thing illuminated by the moonlight: the slick drool on its lips as it salivated in anticipation of a kill. Then it attacked me.

I am, in some ways, very proud of how I acted during that encounter. You see, as long as the thing didn't think I was any sort of threat, I hoped it might get sloppy and clearly telegraph its strike. I was right; it drew back its arm and swung a clumsy, triumphant blow. I forget, did I mention my military background? Well, I used to be an officer in the Air Force. Now, it's been a long time since the Gulf War, and I didn't do much in the way of hand-

to-hand fighting even then, but the training is something that stays with you. It certainly served me well for this one, desperate move, as I caught his arm and pitched his motion around. His claws dug into my shoulder, but missed my neck, and he fell to the floor, tripped by his own momentum. He began to get to his feet almost immediately, but it brought me the precious seconds to grab my rifle and press it to his chest. I didn't hesitate.

The shot ripped through him and he jerked in pain. Not wanting to take any chances, I fired again and again and again until my rifle was empty. Then I picked up Arden's rifle and emptied that one into him as well.

Even after all of that, he still wasn't dead. He had three bullets in his heart, two in his head and many more through the rest of him, but still he writhed there, making weak noises. I didn't know how long this would slow him down for, but I hoped it would give me enough time to escape properly. I looked back as I left the clearing to see him slowly and painfully pushing his claws into his chest, digging for the bullets.

It was luck that saved me, in the end. Some park rangers were driving past our trail on a road about two miles distant. They were coming to investigate the gunshots and I stumbled on to the road through sheer good fortune. I never saw that thing again, or Arden, unfortunately, though they managed to find and recover his body about a week later. I don't think I'll try hunting again. I know the thrill of power that comes with the ability to end the life of something weaker than you, but… I can't forget what it's like to be

the hunted.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Hunted. Yes, I think I'm starting to know the feeling.

Arden Neeli was found dead half a mile off the Appalachian Trail in Virginia on 1st December 2010. His death was ruled a wild animal attack. Mr. Mortimer was treated for physical and mental trauma, but was not implicated in his death. Quite frankly that's all the investigation I'm willing to do on this one. 'Wolfmen in America' is too far-fetched and too far away for me to care about.

It's… been two months now since Martin returned and we became the ones being… hunted. Are we being hunted? Martin's still living here, and I'm leaving less and less. The worms keep turning up. We kill them, but there are more each week. What is she waiting for?

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG032 – Hive

Statement #0142302

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Jane Prentiss, regarding… a wasps' nest in her attic. Original statement given February 23rd, 2014. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I itch all the time. Deep beneath my skin, where the bone sits, enshrined in flesh, I feel it. Something, not moving but that wants to move. Wants to be free. It itches, and I don't think I want it. I don't know what to do.

You can't help me. I don't think so, at least. But whatever it is that calls to me, that wants me for its own, it hates you. It hates what you are and what you do. And if it hates you, then maybe you can help me. If I wanted to be helped. I don't know if I do. You must understand, it sings so sweetly, and I need it, but I am afraid. It isn't right and I need help. I need it to be seen. To be seen in the cold light of knowledge is anathema to the things that crawl and slither

and swarm in the corners and the cracks. In the pitted holes of the hive.

You can't see it, of course. It isn't real. Not like you or I are real. It's more of an everywhere. A feeling. Are you familiar with trypophobia? That disgusted fear at holes, irregular, honeycombed holes. Makes you feel that itch in the back of your mind, like the holes are there too, in your own brain, rotten and hollow and swarming. Is that real?

I'm sorry, I know I'm meant to be telling you what happened. What brought me to this place. This place of books and learning, of sight and beholding. I'm sorry. I should. I will.

I… I haven't slept in some time. I can't sleep. My dreams are crawling and many-legged. Not just slithering and burrowing,. though it is the burrowing that draws me. They always sing that song of flesh. I hope you will forgive me for such a rambling story. I hope you will forgive me for a great many things, as it may be I do worse. I have that feeling, that instinct that squirms through your belly. There will be great violence done here. And I bleed into that violence.

Do you know, I wonder? As I watch you sitting there through the glass. Eating a sandwich. Do you know where you are? You called me "dear". "Have a seat, dear." "You can write it down, dear." "Take as much time as you need, dear." Can you truly know the danger you are in?

There is a wasps' nest in my attic. A fat, sprawling thing that crouches in the shadowed corner. It thrums with life and malice. I could sit there for hours, watching the swirls of pulp and paper on its surface. I have done. It is not the patterns that enthral me, I'm not one of those fools chasing fractals; no, it's what sings behind them. Sings that I am beautiful. Sings that I am a home. That I can be fully consumed by what loves me.

I don't know how long the nest has been there. It's not even my house, I just live there. Some sweaty old man thinks he owns it, taking money for my presence as though it will save him. I used to worry about it, you know. I remember, before the dreams, I would spend so long worrying about that money. About how I could afford to live there. Now I know that whatever the old man thinks, as he passes about the house with brow crinkled and mouth puckered in disapproval, it is not his. It has a thousand truer owners who shift and live and sing within the very walls of the building. He does not even know about the wasps' nest. I wonder how long he has not known. How many years it has been there.

Have you ever heard of the filarial worm? Mosquitoes gift it with their kiss and it grows and grows. It stops water moving round the human body right, makes limbs and bellies swell and sag with fluid. Now, when I look at that fat, sweaty sack, I think about it, and the voice sings of showing him what a real parasite can do.

How many months has it been like this? Was there a time before? There must have been. I remember a life that was not itching, not fear, not nectar-sweet song. I had a job. I sold crystals. They were

clean, and sharp and bright and they did not sing to me, though I sometimes said they did. We would sell the stones to smiling young couples with colour in their hair. I remember, before I found the nest, someone new came. His name was Oliver, and he would look at me so strangely. Not with lust or affection or contempt, but with sadness. Such a deep sadness. And once with fear. It didn't matter, because no-one in the shop wanted to hear about the ants below it. I tried to tell them, to explain, but they did not care. The pretty young things complained and I left.

That was when I still called myself a witch. Wicca and paganism, I would spend my weekends at rituals by the Thames. I wanted something beyond myself, but could not stomach the priest or the imam or pujari of the churches. I knew better. I knew that it was not so simple as to call out to well-trodden gods. I never felt from my rituals anything except exhaustion and pride. I thought that those were my spiritual raptures.

I wish, deep inside, below the itch, that they were still my raptures. I have touched something now, though, that all my talk of ley lines and mother goddesses could never have prepared me for. It is not a god. Or if it is then it is a dead god, decayed and clammy corpse-flesh brimming with writhing graveworms.

When did I first hear it? It wasn't the nest, I'm sure of that. I never went in the attic. It was locked and I didn't have a key. I spent a day sawing through the padlock with an old hacksaw. My hands were blistered by the end. Why would I have done that if I didn't know what I would find? The face of the one who sang to me

dwelling within the hidden darkness above me. I had seen no wasps. I know I hadn't. There are no wasps in the nest. So how else would I have known that I needed to be there, to be in the dark with it, if it had not already been singing to me?

No, that's not right. The nest does not sing to me. It is simply the face. Not the whole face, for the whole of the hive is infinite. An unending plane of wriggling forms swarming in and out of the distended pores and honeycombed flesh. The nest is nothing but paper.

Was it the spiders? There were webs in the corners, around the entryway into the attic. I would watch them scurry and disappear in between the wooden boards. 'Where are you going, little spiders?' I would think. 'What are you seeing in the dark? Is it food? Prey? Predators?' I wondered if it was the spiders that made the gentle buzzing song. It was not. Webs have a song as well, of course, but it is not the song of the hive.

I used to pick at my skin. It was a compulsion. I would spend hours in the bathroom, staring as close as I could get to my face to the mirrors, searching for darkened pores to squeeze and watch the congealed oil worm its way out of my skin. Often I would end with swollen red marks where it had become inflamed with irritation or infection. Did I hear the song then?

Was it when I was a child, such a clear memory of a classmate telling me a blackhead was a hole in my face, and if I didn't keep it clean it would grow and rot. Did I hear it then, as that image lodged

in my mind forever? Or was it last year, passing by a strip of green they call a park near my house, after the rain, and watching a hundred worms crawl and squirm to the surface.

Perhaps I've always heard it. Perhaps the itch has always been the real me, and it was the happy, smiling Jane who called herself a witch and drank wine in the park when it was sunny. Maybe it was her who was the maddened illusion that hides the sick squirming reality of what I am. Of what we all are, when you strip away the pretence that there is more to a person than a warm, wet habitat for the billion crawling things that need a home. That love us in their way.

I need to think. To clear my head. To try and remember, but remember what? I was lonely before. I know that. I had friends, at least I used to, but I lost them. Or they lost me. Why was it? I remember shouting, recriminations, and I was abandoned. No idea why. The memories are a blur. I do remember that they called me "toxic". I don't think I really knew what that meant, except that it was the reason I was so very painfully lonely. Was that it? Was I swayed and drawn simply by the prospect of being genuinely loved? Not loved as you would understand it. A deeper, more primal love. A need as much as a feeling. Love that consumes you in all ways.

You can't help me. I'm sure of that now. I have tried to write it down, to put it into terms and words you could understand. And now I stare at it and not a word of it is even enough to fully describe the fact that I itch. Because 'itch' is not the right word.

There is no right word because for all your Institute and ignorance may laud the power of the word, it cannot even stretch to fully capture what I feel in my bones. What possible recourse could there be for me in your books and files and libraries except more useless ink and dying letters? I see now why the hive hates you. You can see it and log it and note it's every detail but you can never understand it. You rob it of its fear even though your weak words have no right to do so.

I do not know why the hive chose me, but it did. And I think that it always had. The song is loud and beautiful and I am so very afraid. There is a wasps' nest in my attic. Perhaps it can soothe my itching soul.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

This is… uh…

Excuse me, reading that was, um… hmm. While I am pleased that we have… found the statement that Prentiss gave the Institute, it answers far fewer of our questions than I would have hoped, and gives us little new information about her than we had before, save for a snapshot of her mental condition before her hospital admission. We were already aware of her religious history, and her breakdown over an ant infestation that apparently led to her termination from her work at the Good Energies spiritual supplies shop in Archway.

The wasps' nest is interesting. The paramedics report claims that when they and the police responded to reports of screaming at Miss Prentiss' flat on Prospero Road, they found her in a loft space, passed out, with her forearm buried up to the elbow in "pulped organic matter". This could indeed have been a wasps' nest, I suppose, but no nearby residents reported to have seen any wasps in the area. Unfortunately, it could not be examined further, as later that night, there was a fire that completely destroyed the flat, and killed the landlord, Arthur Nolan. The fire service determined he had fallen asleep with a lit cigarette, due to the fact that he was found sitting in the remains of an armchair, with no sign he had made any attempt to escape.

Miss Prentiss was taken to the Emergency Department at Whittington Hospital, but she was already showing signs of the… infestation that would characterise her later appearances. Six hospital staff were attempting to treat and sedate her, when many of the worms were violently expelled from her body. They quickly burrowed through the soft tissue of the medical personnel – eyes, tongue, *et cetera* – and into the brain, killing them after roughly a minute and a half. She then walked calmly out of the door to A&E. A nurse attempted to run, but in his panic he tripped on the stairs and broke his neck. Then she was gone. The Institute was consulted, as apparently during her admission she had claimed that she was being possessed, but it was decided the situation was medical in nature and our involvement was dropped in favour of, what I can only describe, as a cover-up. If we'd known about this statement, perhaps things might have been different, but here we are.

Still, anyone who's familiarised themselves with her file could tell you this. We still don't have any evidence that Prentiss is actually paranormal. It could just be an unknown, aggressive parasite. There are weird things out there that are perfectly natural. It's not, though. I know it's not natural. Somehow I… I feel it. I'm sorry, my academic detachment seems to have fled me. Something in this statement has got to me a bit. I'm… I'm going to go lie down.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG033 – Boatswain's Call

Statement #0110201

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

(impatient) Look, Tim, I'd love to discuss this further, but as you can see, I have a recording to do.

TIM

(coaxing) Oh, come on. Look, it's not a big deal. We just need to do a *few* of them again –

ARCHIVIST

Out of the question.

TIM

It's just confusing if not. Er, like the garbageman's statement –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Mr. Woodward.

TIM

Yeah, so, you said that Alan Parfitt was reported missing… ah, in

August 2009, which would actually be six months *(laugh)* after the statement had been given.

ARCHIVIST

(grumpy) Obviously it should have been 2008, I misspoke an '8' as a '9,' What does it matter?

TIM

Well, *someone* noticed.

ARCHIVIST

Who?

TIM

Er, Josh Cole – uh, *great* guy – he's one of the students using our resources for a dissertation? Um… oh, and here, in Miss Montauk's statement, about her father's killings, you refer to case, um, 9220611 as case, um, 1106922.

Oh, and don't get me started on the other case numbers around the Hill Top hauntings, they're a *mess* –

ARCHIVIST

(very grumpy) **Alleged** hauntings. And who honestly cares if I misspoke case 9220611 as 1106922? Another *student?*

TIM

(obstinately chipper) Uh, well, actually, yes. Um, Samantha Emery – she's *lovely* – she's actually doing a PhD in manifestations…

ARCHIVIST

I don't care. If it's not enough that Gertrude left us with such a *pointlessly* awkward filing system, half the time she doesn't even stay consistent in her own records.

TIM

Um – to be honest with you, er, *I* don't really understand the system.

ARCHIVIST

Last three digits of the year, then the day, then the month. I don't know why she did it like that, but I can't change it now.

TIM

Ohhh… okay… Alright, so what happens if *more* than one statement is given on the same day?

ARCHIVIST

I… don't know. It never came up. Was there anything else?

TIM

Oh yeah, just one.

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping mutter) Good lord…

TIM

So, in case 8163103, it isn't clear if Albrecht's wife is called 'Clara' or 'Carla,' 'cause you keep switching back and forth…

ARCHIVIST

Well, I'm *sorry* if I found it hard to read a 200-year old letter, written in cursive by a native German speaker. Who complained about that one?

TIM

(cheery demeanor wearing thin) Oh, it's, it's not a complaint! *I* just noticed, actually.

Um, look, okay. I *know* you've been under a lot of pressure… it's not a big deal, I just think it *might* be worth re-recording these statements.

ARCHIVIST

(boiling over) No. I don't have time. I still have a mountain of haphazard statements to get through, not to mention that I need to keep this wretched tape recorder on hand *just in case* I encounter one of the files too *stubborn* to work on anything else. And when I do, I have to actually *read* the damn thing, which is…

TIM

(background) Oh, woah, woah… woah!

ARCHIVIST

(more quietly) …is fine. It's… fine, I just haven't been sleeping much these last few months, what with all this… worm business. Which reminds me, if you do see Elias, tell him thanks for the extra extinguishers.

TIM

Oh, uh, yeah. Yeah, sure. Um…

It's getting bad. I mean, Martin keeps showing me his tongue *(uncomfortable laugh)* and asking if it "looks infested". Um… so what do you want me to do about these errors?

ARCHIVIST

I really don't care. Put a Post-It on the tapes or something. I'm not re-recording them. Now if you'll excuse me…

TIM

Oh, yeah, sure, yep, I'll let you get back to it.

[DOOR CLOSES]

ARCHIVIST

Right. Oh, still running? Okay.

Statement of Carlita Sloane, regarding her work on a container ship travelling to Southampton from Porto do Itaqui. Original statement given January the 2nd, 2011. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I've been working the shipping routes for years now, so I know there's plenty of messed up things can happen out there. You remember the old saying 'worse things happen at sea'? Well, let me tell you it's just as true now as it ever was. But I've never seen *weird* like I saw when serving on the *Tundra.* I didn't even want the job, really, but I didn't have a lot of choice. We'd just hit Porto do Itaqui in Brazil in late November of last year when the ship I was on got stopped because of 'cargo irregularities'. I don't know what it was. Might have been drugs, human trafficking, might have just been a crooked harbour master looking for a kickback, but it didn't really matter. Point was I had to jump ship.

This wasn't an easy thing, though. A sailor's union should be recognised anywhere in the world, but when it came down to it, my membership of Nautilus, a UK union, meant nothing when I was trying to get a place on a cargo run coming out of Brazil. Didn't help that I'm a woman. A lot of people don't think shipping is a job for women. Hell, a lot of people who work on ships don't think it is. You don't see a lot of us in the trade, and every ounce of respect I got, some dick-waving asshole probably bled for. But that's fine, I

can hold my own, and it hasn't been such a problem since I shaved my head. It was enough to keep me on land for a good few days, though, as I tried to find another ship to take me on. Well, that and my bad Spanish.

I'm sure I don't need to tell you how relieved I was when I heard that a British ship had made port. The *Tundra.* Now at that point I was starting to get a bit desperate, so I was keen to go to the captain and just about beg passage. Screw my qualifications, if needed I'd sign on as a workaway. I could find a better position once I was somewhere I spoke the language properly.

I eventually found the captain in a small bar in one of the seedier areas of the dockside. I'd been told his name was Peter Lukas, but to be honest I wouldn't have needed his name – he was the only white guy in the place. Even by those standards he was very pale, weirdly so for someone who apparently lived their life on the sea. He sat there at a small table, completely alone, drinking a cup of black coffee. He was staring into the distance, and didn't seem to notice anything going on around him. I sat down opposite and coughed.

His eyes only moved a fraction of an inch to focus on me, but it felt as though the movement had the weight of a heavy stone door. Like a tomb. Don't know why that's what popped into my head, but there you go. I asked if he was Peter Lukas, and he said, "Yes". I'd gone blank on what to say next, and it was then that I noticed the silence. I looked around to see that the place was now completely empty. Even the bartender was nowhere to be seen, and the only sound was the whir of the ceiling fans above us. The captain was

still staring at me, so I swallowed my unease and began to explain my situation to him. I left out the part about the criminal possibilities of my last ship, but was clear that I was in desperate need of a new post. When I had finished, he was quiet for a few minutes. Then he nodded.

“We have one space. Report tomorrow. At dawn.”

That was all he said. And it was all I needed. The *Tundra* wasn’t difficult to find when I headed to the docks the next day. It was big, already stacked high with an array of colourful shipping containers. I wondered if they’d loaded it up overnight, as there didn’t seem to be much activity from the crane. It was early, and I was glad I was leaving Brazil before the wet season really got going, as the sky was threatening to break. Making my way through the dock I asked around until I was finally pointed to the mate. He was a short man, heavyset with a thick, black beard. His warm, brown skin was stained darker by a life working in the sun, and he didn’t smile when he looked at me. Around his neck, I saw a chain ending in a small brass ball and stem. It looked like an old boatswain’s call, an antique sailor’s whistle.

I introduced myself, told him what I’d told the captain and gave my qualifications and experience. The bearded mate listened quietly until I finished. Then he shrugged, and said they were in need of an Ordinary Seaman, and I was welcome to the position if I wanted it. OS was a bit of a step down for me, as I’ve been pulling Able Seaman pay for these last few years, but it was a ticket out of Porto do Itaqui, so I jumped at the chance. The mate still didn’t smile, but

he did offer his hand and introduced himself in a gentle Dutch accent as Tadeas Dahl, First Mate of the *Tundra.* I was surprised, as it seemed a bit abrupt to be leaving, and I hadn't even had time to stow away the duffel bag that was my only luggage. Still, I wasn't about to disobey the first order I'd been given on a new ship.

The *Tundra* was pretty normal. I've served on a half dozen ships almost identical to it, and I fell into my duties quickly. We set off almost as soon as I was on board, and it was only later I discovered we were heading across the Atlantic towards Southampton. I was very happy to find that out, as I had assumed we'd be making plenty more stops before crossing back to England. With any luck it wouldn't be more than a couple of weeks before I was home, and those would be spent in maintenance, repainting and taking watches with 'Iron Mike' – er, the autopilot – so that was fine.

But I did start to notice a few things on board which didn't really seem to add up. The first was the crew. They were quiet. *Very* quiet. I mean, I've been on ships where I was pretty much the only native English speaker, and plenty of people prefer to keep to themselves. Hell, not being too comfortable around people is a damn fine reason to go to sea.

This was different, though. It wasn't just that they didn't talk much, they seemed uncomfortable with me. They'd avoid eye contact, and only barely acknowledge me if we were on a shift together. As first, I thought it was because I was a woman, but then I saw that it wasn't just me. They avoided each other just as much as they did me. Meals were always quiet, no matter how many people were

eating, and there was no friendly game of cards or chat in living quarters. There was no real conversation in any language. It was like they were doing everything in their power not to think about each other. It took me less than a day of ignored hellos and grunted answers before I fell into line, becoming just as quiet as my crewmates.

The only person who spoke was Tadeas Dahl. The mate would walk among the crew, giving instructions and orders in a dozen different languages, as the crew scrambled to carry out his commands. He was just as composed as he had been when I met him, and it soon became clear that, if he *had* emotions, he kept a tight wrap on them. He would stride along the ship, his antique whistle swinging from his neck. He never actually blew the boatswain's call, apparently preferring to summon the crew via the intercom or horn. It just hung there, its polished brass heavy around his neck.

I didn't see Captain Lukas at all that first week. I only knew he was onboard because every meal time the cooks would hand a tray of food to the mate, who'd take it up to the captain's cabin. We never saw the man himself, though.

There was one crewmember who did catch my eye. He was a young guy, white and, from what I could tell, Scottish. I never really got more than his name out of him: Sean Kelly. He had the bunk opposite me, and we were on different shifts, so I would often see him lying there when I returned from my night watch. He didn't talk any more than the others, but he also didn't go around with that *blank* look on his face. He looked *scared.*

There were other odd things about the ship, but hands down the *weirdest* thing, I didn't notice until a few days out into the Atlantic. Now one of my duties was to check the deck containers were securely in place, none of the twistlocks or lashing rods had broken or come loose. It was usually just busywork – I'd never been on a ship that lost a container, though it does happen. This shift, though, I noticed something wrong. I saw that one of the lashing rods, towards the stern, had broken. And not at one of the ends, or the twistlock itself, but right in the middle of what should have been solid metal. From a distance it looked fine, new paint shining in the sun, but looking closer I saw that it had rusted all the way through. Not just that, but checking out where the rod connected to the container, it became clear that they had rusted together. Fresh paint covered up most of it, but once I knew what I was looking for, I saw it everywhere. The shipping containers, all of them, were rusted in place.

How could this have happened, though, if they were being changed over at port? How long had the *Tundra* been sailing with the same cargo?

I decided I had to look inside. Stupid, maybe. If it was something illegal, they might toss me overboard first and ask questions never, but only if I got caught. And I was just about sick of nasty surprises.

I did it on my next late shift. I kept an eye on the rest of the crew and waited for my moment. I'd already marked out a ground level container where the padlock had practically rusted off. It wouldn't be difficult to get it open. It was about 3am when I had my chance.

I was alone on deck and the wind was howling loud enough to muffle the groan of the container's rusted hinges. It took three kicks from my steel toecaps to get it open, but finally I was able to get the door ajar. It was so stiff it took almost all my strength to get enough of a gap to walk through, but finally I could see inside.

It was completely empty. There was no sign of cargo, or any markings or debris on the floor that might have shown there had *ever* been anything inside. I couldn't believe it – a transport ship with nothing to transport? It didn't make any sense. I managed to bust two other containers open, but they were the same. As far as I could tell, every container on the ship was empty.

I was still trying to figure out what this could mean when I saw a couple of torches approaching. I almost panicked and ran, but where exactly was I going to escape to? The empty, uncaring ocean stretched out for hundreds of miles in every direction. So instead I swallowed my fear, and pushed the door carefully closed, trying my best to hide the broken lock before making my way onto the deck.

I was met by the mate and a half dozen other crewmen behind him. He looked at me for a second, then nodded and told me to follow. Then he continued walking. Confused, I headed after them as they made their way around the ship, silently collecting up or waking all the rest of the crew. I started to ask what was going on, but the glares I got shut me right up. Finally, when we had what looked like the whole crew together, we walked over to the lifeboat.

Now we definitely weren't sinking, so I hadn't really paid much

attention to the lifeboat before, but now I looked at it, I realised it wasn't what I'd have expected. Most modern container ships have a lifeboat that looks more like a lumpy orange blob than a boat. They're designed to be quickly and safely dropped into the water and tough out whatever conditions the sea might throw at them. But this was an old-fashioned boat, with oars and a winch mechanism for lowering it into the water. It didn't even look like it had any supplies in it. Standing there in front of it was Captain Lukas, as silent as the rest of his crew.

The Captain nodded, and one by one the crew of the *Tundra* got on board the lifeboat. I got on too. I mean, what else was I supposed to do? I didn't know what was going on and no-one seemed to want to tell me, but I sure as hell wasn't getting left *alone* on that big, empty ship. So I got in and sat down, as a couple of the crew began to lower the lifeboat into the sea. A few others took up the oars, and as soon as we hit the water, they began to row quietly away from the *Tundra*, which floated, motionless.

The sky was clear and the wind had died down, so the stars reflected perfectly on the still ocean surface. All the lights on the ship had been turned off, so the world and all the empty horizon was only lit by the moon. As we rowed, I looked around my companions on the lifeboat. Everyone I recognised was there, except for one. I checked each face in turn, but I could see no sign of Sean Kelly, my scared bunkmate. Had we left him behind? Was he still back on the ship, sleeping away ignorant of the fact that he was now utterly and completely alone?

Almost as though he knew I was about to speak, Tadeas gave me a warning glare. The mate reached down and took the old brass whistle from his neck. He pressed it to his lips, and blew.

I have never heard a whistle sound like that. It was shrill, so high and piercing that I felt my hair stand on end, but it also seemed… distant. Like I was hearing it from far, far away. I don't know how long he blew that boatswain's call for, but by the end, I realised we were surrounded by a thick sea smoke. We should have far too far south for it, but it rolled and billowed around the lifeboat, obscuring the *Tundra.* No-one said a word, but I could have sworn a few of my shipmates were crying.

I don't know how long we floated there, sat in the dark water, but eventually the fog cleared, and the mate sounded the boatswain's call again, this time a short, sharp whistle. We saw the *Tundra,* dark and still upon the water, and began to row back towards it. The lifeboat was painstakingly raised and the rest of the crew returned to their positions.

Sean Kelly was nowhere to be seen. And I never saw him again.

After that night, the atmosphere on board changed. People talked, and you'd occasionally hear actual laughter. Games were played, people drank, and there was this sense of *relief* to it all. I tried to join in, but got dark looks any time I asked about Sean. At one point the third mate, a man named Kim Duong, told me that I should shut up and be grateful, as it "hadn't been an easy choice".

I kept to myself the rest of the way, and left the ship as soon as we landed in Southampton. I didn't even think about my pay until it came through a couple of days later: twenty-five thousand pounds. For barely two weeks work. I don't mind telling you, it was almost enough to tempt me back.

Almost.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

An interesting statement, though difficult to investigate any potentially-paranormal activity, as there does not appear to have been anything *explicitly* supernatural occurring in this statement. A lot of strange happenings and implicit weirdness, but nothing that can be isolated as a 'supernatural event'.

There's also the fact that even a casual search of port authority records shows the *Tundra* is a currently-active cargo ship operating for Solus Shipping PLC, a company founded and majority-owned by Nathaniel Lukas. In addition to such business ventures, the Lukas family also provides funding to several academic and research organisations – including the Magnus Institute.

Much as I want to dig further into this, especially given certain parallels with case 0161301, Elias gets very twitchy when we look into anything that might conceivably have funding repercussions.

It doesn't look like I'm going to be able to do any further

investigations into this. Even though the official crew manifest for the *Tundra* has remained the same for the last ten years. Even though I can't find any record of actual cargo being loaded or unloaded into it from any UK port. Even though Sean Kelly disappeared from the port of Felixstowe in October 2010, and his body washed up on the coast of Morocco in April 2011, six months later. According to the coroner, it had only been in the water for five days.

Maybe I'll mention it to Elias. Just in case.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG034 – Anatomy Class

Statement #0161207

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Apologies for the somewhat archaic –

DR. ELLIOTT

No need to worry, I understand. Some things you just can't trust to computers. It's like I always say about those robotic surgery machines. It's just not the same. If I'm going to be operating on a man's pancreas, I want to *feel* that pancreas. Fiddling with a joystick just won't cut it. As it were.

ARCHIVIST

I didn't think you still performed surgery?

DR. ELLIOTT

I keep up with the developments. And I remember the feel of a pancreas.

ARCHIVIST

Well… quite. Now, if you'd be so good as to –

DR. ELLIOTT

You know you have an infestation, don't you?

ARCHIVIST

Excuse me? I'm not sure –

DR. ELLIOTT

Yes, little, grey, maggot things. I saw a few on the way in. Don't recognise the species, but I'd say you need to get the exterminators in here. Gas the little blighters.

ARCHIVIST

You saw them? You weren't bitten were you?

DR. ELLIOTT

Bitten? They're worms. Still, I'll admit I don't like the look of them. I reckon the sooner you get someone in to kill them dead, the better.

ARCHIVIST

We've tried, believe me. Now, shall we?

DR. ELLIOTT

Oh, certainly. Where, where do you want me to start? The bones? The blood? The… uh… the fruit?

ARCHIVIST

Right from the beginning. One second.

Statement of Dr. Lionel Elliott, regarding a series of events that took place during his class…

DR. ELLIOTT

Introduction to Human Anatomy and Physiology.

ARCHIVIST

At King's College, London, in early 2016.

Statement recorded direct from subject 12th July, 2016. Statement begins.

DR. ELLIOTT

Now?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, just start from the beginning.

DR. ELLIOTT (STATEMENT)

Right. Well, I shouldn't even have been teaching the class, really. As far as I knew, I wasn't going to be needed for any teaching on the Biomedical Engineering course this year. I can't say I was particularly upset. The Human Anatomy module is where a lot of the engineers discover just how messy the human body is, and

while the human heart is a phenomenal piece of machinery in terms of design and function, most of the students would be more comfortable holding a transistor. Not to put too fine a point on it, I get tired of… squeamish students, and was glad that I could avoid it this year.

You can perhaps imagine, then, that I was not best pleased when Elena Bower, the admissions officer, emailed me last November to say that there had been a mistake, and I was needed to take a 'spillover class'. Apparently the system had accepted more students for the course than there were places, and they were trying to organise an additional class for the seven who were unassigned. It didn't make a lot of sense to me, Anatomy class wasn't until the second term, so surely this mistake should have emerged earlier, but Elena just kept saying she didn't know, she just had seven students who needed tutorials. I won't pretend I took the news gracefully. I have a lot of research due shortly and, well, you know academia – never enough hours in the day. Still, I was the only staff member both qualified to teach the class and technically free when it had to be scheduled. So I agreed, although that really makes it sound like I had more of a choice than I actually did.

I didn't meet the students until the module started this January. I wasn't responsible for any of the lectures, so the first time I saw them was in our initial class tutorial. They all sat there, all seven, staring at me, and I felt… oddly uncomfortable. There, there was nothing wrong with them, of course, nothing strange to see or to look at, just… well, this is going to sound stupid to say out loud,

but I don't remember what they look like. Any of them. I remember that each wore blue jeans and a white shirt, though they were all different makes and styles; I think one of the girls had a skirt, instead. I must have noticed that they were wearing the same outfits, but it didn't strike me as odd. They all just looked so… normal. Unremarkable. I remember their names, though, from the register. They stuck with me – maybe because they were such an international group. There was Erika Mustermann, Jan Novak, Piotr and Pavel Petrov, who I think were brothers, maybe twins, John Doe, Fulan al-Fulani and Juan Pérez.

I greeted them when I entered the room, and was met with silence. Not a malicious or angry silence, just silence. I've never been self-conscious when teaching, but walking to my seat with those fourteen eyes just… watching me… it made ever so slightly uncomfortable. I got the oddest feeling they were judging my walk. *[Nervous laugh]*

The class began, and we started going over some of the basics of anatomy and how the body works. They started to talk then, and some of my unease left me. I don't remember exactly what was said, after doing it long enough most tutorials just kind of blur together a bit, but I recall being struck by just how basic some of their questions were. The composition of blood, where in the body the various organs sat, the sort of thing that anyone who's done a science GCSE should know. I was almost tempted to ask where they went to school. At the time, I didn't question the fact that they must have all gone to the same school.

Aside from that it was mostly normal, except… about halfway through the tutorial, we discussed the lungs and respiration. Inhalation, alveoli, et cetera. As I said, basic stuff, but I paused afterwards, just to have a think about where to go next, and I heard the sound of them breathing. That's not abnormal, I know, but it seemed to fill the silence so suddenly, and all at once. I could… I could have sworn that I didn't actually hear it before that moment. Like they'd only just then started breathing. *[Nervous laugh]* Which is, which is absurd, obviously. I was probably just listening out for it because we'd been discussing the lungs. Even so, it was disconcerting, and I don't mind telling you that I breathed quite a sigh of relief myself when the tutorial was over and I could get out of there.

Now, I consider myself a conscientious worker, and in all my years at King's I can count on one hand the number of times I've called in sick, but when the time came for the next tutorial with this class, I had to stay home with a migraine. It wasn't a lie, exactly, the thought of sitting there for another two hours with those staring, placid eyes gave me such a spell of anxiety that my brain felt like it was being stabbed with a shard of ice. I did have to teach them eventually, of course. I couldn't avoid it forever. Re-entering that room, though… All of them were sat in the exact same positions, in the exact same clothes, their breathing deliberate and almost pointed. When Erika Mustermann – or was it Jan Novak? – said 'Good morning', the others followed suit, one by one, and I had to fight the urge to run. It struck me then that, despite how diverse their names were, none of them seemed to have any noticeable

accent. Not that it did anything to reassure me.

There was no-one else who could take the tutorials. Believe me, I did everything I could to try and find a replacement. Still, once I got used to their stares, their silence, and the fact that their questions were both specific and oddly basic – one of the Petrovs once asked me “How sharp are the knees meant to be” – I swear, it was just about tolerable. I’m a bit ashamed to admit it, but I came to terms with the fact that I didn’t care if they passed any exams, and that actually made the whole affair more manageable. I just did my best to stop caring.

And then came our first of two sessions in the dissection room. We were looking at the skeleton. I had been dreading this. Given exactly how creepy and unsettling the students were just sat in a classroom, the idea of what they could do when given access to human remains made me feel quite nauseous. But I couldn’t bring myself to leave them there alone, so I went.

It was even worse than I’d feared, seeing them stood there over the bits of cadaver. Their faces, normally so neutral, were alive with… what was it I saw? Excitement? Curiosity? Hunger? Whatever it was, it didn’t reach their eyes, still staring and blank. I went through the procedures with them and tried my best to keep the trembling out of my voice. When Fulan reached for a scalpel and started cutting into our samples, I felt faint.

I was trying to keep an eye on everyone, but the dissection tables were arranged in a semi-circle around the lab, and each time I

turned to face one of the students, I began to hear this cracking sound from whichever tables I wasn't looking at. Like a snapping bone, or a ribcage being forced open. I'd turn back and see nothing untoward, just John or Erika or Juan or whoever it was, looking at me quizzically over distinctly unbroken bones. But it kept happening. Whenever I wasn't looking, I heard the crunch and the crack of bone. I couldn't ask about it. I knew the dead-eyed, mute stare they'd give me if I did, and I just couldn't face that.

Finally, I managed to position myself so that I could see what was happening behind me in the reflective edge of the metal table. It wasn't much, but I could see a slightly warped image. It was Pavel, in this case. I saw him pick up a bone – a radius, I believe, from the forearm. He held it up next to his own arm, and then there came that snapping, crunching noise. I swear I saw his arm distend itself, the skin shifting as something inside changed and rearranged, until it matched the length of bone he was holding up to it.

I tried not to react, not to make a noise at this mad impossibility that I saw. I couldn't help it, though, and my legs gave out. I collapsed on the floor with a whimpering cry. None of them looked at me, none of them offered to help me up, none of them gave any reaction at all. I shut my eyes tight as that cracking sound began to come from every direction, as all seven of them began to change themselves. It went on for almost half an hour, until our allotted time in the lab ended. And then they left, walking past me, still sat helpless on the floor. As they did, each of them thanked me for the lesson as though nothing had happened. And I swear that every

single one of them was taller than when they started.

I started taking more sick leave after that. I avoided their tutorials as often as possible, and when I did go we largely just sat there in silence until one of them asked a question about human anatomy, which I would reluctantly answer. I know I should have just abandoned them entirely. If they were going to complain to anyone, they would have done it already. But even then, I was worried my colleagues might notice, and I really didn't want to get a reputation as some absentee tutor. It didn't help that a colleague of mine, Dr. Laura Gill, once expressed surprise on learning I'd been absent the day before, as apparently she'd passed by my teaching room and my anatomy class had just been sat there, waiting quietly. The thought of them politely filing into every tutorial, just sat there, blank and staring, whether I was there or not, just waiting… To be quite frank I think that bothered me almost more than being sat there with them.

Still, I managed to largely avoid them until the 21st of March, when they had their second lab dissection. Hearts. I'm not an idiot. I was well aware of the sort of sinister nonsense that was likely to happen if I went, but I also knew by now that they would attend whether or not I was there. And to leave them in the lab unsupervised would be the sort of thing that would get me actually fired from my position.

It was a rainy morning. I remember that, because I deliberately didn't put up an umbrella. Something inside me was so dreading what was going to happen that the very act of opening umbrellas

seemed pointless, as though my being dry couldn't stop what was coming, then there was no reason not to get soaked. So I was dripping wet when I entered the lab, and my glasses had steamed up to the point where I could no longer see through them. When I wiped them clean, they revealed those seven blank faces, utterly unconcerned with my sodden state. Each had somehow got the heart laid out in from them on the dissection tray. I decided not to prolong it, and waved them to start.

I don't know what I expected. Maybe I thought they'd descend into some sort of feeding frenzy, but they didn't. They just began to dissect the hearts, as any other class would, occasionally asking me polite questions. I was so taken aback at how normal the whole situation seemed to be that it took me some time to actually answer them. I did, though, and the first hour of the class almost put me at least a little bit at ease. The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Maybe they were doing weird things to their insides, but if it was the heart, then I couldn't see it and I couldn't hear it. And I'd long since decided with this class, that if I couldn't see or hear it, I didn't care.

Then Erika Mustermann held up her heart and looked at me. I began to get that sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach as she asked me "How does the heart pump blood?" I started to explain the biological mechanisms of the heart pumping, when she shook her head slowly and said, "What does it *look* like?" And then, when I didn't answer, "Is it like this?"

The heart in her hand began to spasm. Not like the regular,

rhythmic pulse of a heartbeat, but like a balloon being rapidly squeezed at one end. Bits of it swelled and stretched and distorted seemingly at random, and blood began to flow haphazardly from the ventricles, dripping down Erika's forearm and dribbling onto the floor.

I stood there, speechless, staring at this horrible miracle, when from behind her I see Fulan raise his heart, saying, "That's not what it's like." And blood starts to gush from all over his heart in tiny geysers, shooting in every direction. Soon each of them is holding a heart up, each pumping and throbbing differently, blood leaking, spurting out of them in a different way, a different nightmare. They wanted me to tell them which was right. *[Nervous laugh]* I don't know how long I stared before I finally raised my hand to point at Jan Novak, who seemed to have the closest to an accurate impression of a regular human heartbeat. Then I turned and walked out of the lab.

I spent the rest of the day sat in the staffroom, waiting for someone to come running in, screaming about the lab being full of blood. I expected questions I couldn't answer and immediate termination. But nothing happened. No-one came. When I returned to the lab several hours later, there was no sign of any blood, except for the tiniest speck, dried into a tile crack in the corner. Unless that, that had been there before? I don't know. My shoes were still speckled with blood, though, so I know I wasn't hallucinating it. I checked with Dr. Gill, who confirmed that she could see the spots, though I neglected to tell her it was blood. I had no intention of inviting

further questions.

I missed the next three tutorials. I just stayed at home. But something wouldn't let me just simply let it go. Finally, I made a decision. I wanted to see where they lived. I felt like I needed to, for some reason. Needed to see if they existed outside of my class, outside of my mind. I asked Elena and, irregular as it was, she gave me the address. It didn't surprise me to find out they all lived in the same place. A semi-detached house on Kingsland Road in Newham. I'm afraid I don't remember the number, and the details have disappeared from the college systems.

The house itself was run down, as might have been expected, and I must have spent a good fifteen minutes just stood in front of it, waiting for the courage to approach. Finally, I knocked on the door. The wood was old and dry, and some flaked off under my knuckles. It opened immediately, and there stood Jan Novak. When she saw me, her mouth twisted into something I think was meant to be a smile.

"Hello," she said, "have you come to give us more lessons? We would like to learn about the liver." Her eyes locked onto my abdomen.

I was about to reply when a muffled scream of pain came from somewhere deep inside the house. It sounded ragged, like whoever was crying out had been gagged. I looked to Jan Novak, who showed no indication she had heard it, still staring at where I had taught her my liver would be. I ran, and she watched me go without

moving.

I did call the police, but they just told me that the house was currently unoccupied, and they'd found no evidence that there had been anyone present. I took great pains never to see the class again. I avoided all tutorials, and simply waited until the end of term. I haven't seen them since.

ARCHIVIST

That's it?

DR. ELLIOTT

Not… quite. There was one other thing. When I went to the classroom shortly after what should have been their final tutorial, I found… something on the desk.

It was an apple. Next to it was a handwritten note that said "Thank you for teaching us the insides". I burned the note, just in case.

ARCHIVIST

And the apple, did you… eat it?

DR. ELLIOTT

(interrupting) Do I look like an idiot? Of course not! I cut it in half, first, to check if it was… off.

ARCHIVIST

And?

DR. ELLIOTT

Human teeth. Inside were human teeth arranged in a smile. Here, *(cloth moving)* I brought you the two halves to see for yourselves.

ARCHIVIST

Oh good lord! That's…

DR. ELLIOTT

Deeply unpleasant, yes. You can *keep* it, if you want. As *proof*.

ARCHIVIST

We do *not* want it. I'm afraid it isn't really proof.

Someone could have stuck those teeth in after the apple had been cut.

DR. ELLIOTT

[Somewhat distressed] You think I would do that?!

ARCHIVIST

I didn't say you would, I just said it was enough of a possibility that I don't think your… tooth apple has a place in our Artefact Storage.

Also, it is, technically, medical waste.

DR. ELLIOTT

Fine. I'll dispose of it myself. Now, is there anything else you want me?

ARCHIVIST

No, this should do. We'll investigate and get back to you if we find anything.

Statement ends.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

The first thing about this statement that makes me dubious is that it comes from a fellow academic. Historic and prestigious as the Magnus Institute is, there are still many within the sphere of higher education that do not grant it the respect it deserves, and some have been known to make false statements as ill-conceived jokes.

Another mark against the veracity of the statement is the names of the students. A quick Internet search reveals 'Erika Mustermann' as the official German placeholder name, similar to the English, well, the English name 'John Doe'. The same is true the other names, 'Juan Pérez' is the generic name of choice in most Spanish speaking countries, 'Fulan al-Fulani' in the Middle East, et cetera. It seems

strange to me that Dr. Elliott would fail to take note of this.

Still, Tim made contact with Elena Bower in the King's administration office, and while she couldn't find any actual records of them in the system, she does remember them being there, and confirms that she assigned them to Dr. Elliott last year. She could be in on it, of course, but Tim seems to believe her.

There's also the matter of the teeth. I stand by my assessment that there is no evidence they were placed there by supernatural means, but it does seem an awfully long way to go for a bad joke. In the end, we did send them off to a dental specialist, but they weren't able to tell us much beyond the fact that they all seemed like healthy adult teeth, and most of them appeared to come from different people.

There's not much more we can do to follow this up, without dedicating additional time we can't afford. The only other lead was Sasha's discovery that, early last year, Dr. Rashid Sadana took his own life. There's no direct connection, except that he taught the Anatomy, Physiology and Pathology for Complementary Therapies course at St. Mary's University, and the only note found near the body simply read "NOT TO BE USED FOR TEACHING".

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG035 – Old Passages

Statement #0020406

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Harold Silvana, regarding discoveries made during the renovation of the Reform Club, Pall Mall. Original statement given June 4th, 2002. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I'm a builder. Sort of. I always find myself using the words 'craftsman' or 'artisan', but that's mostly because of my client base. I specialise in renovation and alterations on listed buildings and those of historical or architectural significance. In simple terms it's not much different to any other sort of construction work, except it takes about three times as long and costs ten times as much. That's not to say I rip people off. You need to spend almost half the time just planning exactly how you're going to tackle any given job, while preserving or recreating the original architecture as much as possible, and then you have to be incredibly careful when you're doing the work. I'm quite serious when I say that if you're not

paying attention and keeping the alterations well-documented, you can get sued for millions over knocking out the wrong brick. Plus, the materials aren't cheap. So, yes, my services are expensive, but me and my team are worth every penny. And the sort of people I deal with, or should I say the sort of people whose personal assistants I deal with, can afford it.

I don't have a company, per se. People hire me for me, and I have a small team I trust to help out with the work itself. They're technically freelance contractors, but the pay's good enough and, in London at least, there's enough work that they're happy to wait on my call.

I've found plenty of interesting things in this job. I suppose that's not unexpected when you're digging around old buildings. We got kicked off a job once when we found some bones under a very venerable country house that will remain nameless, as the owners contacted the British Museum, who couldn't take over fast enough. There have also been a few jewellery pieces that found their way to other museums, and once we found a box of 17th century erotic poems that I think are currently languishing in the storerooms of the V&A museum. But I never found anything like what was under 100 Pall Mall.

We'd been called in to do some work on the basement and ground floor of the Reform Club. It wasn't anything major. Some upkeep on a few of the historic pieces, replace a few of the earlier renovations. The amount of actual work involved was minimal, but it was a Grade I listed building, so the amount of care we had to take

stretched it into a week-long job. It didn't help that we had to schedule around the fact that it's still a very active social venue, so we could only actually come out of the basement when it wasn't full of people too important to see builders. Grade I listing is a significant payday, though, so I certainly wasn't going to rock the boat.

It was about two in the morning when the kid showed up. It was just me and Rachael Turley, who does most of our marble work, though we were mostly just doing surveying at that point. Alfred Bartlett was out getting coffee, though god knows where from at that time of night. We were mostly just kicking our heels really, since he's the plumber and we needed his expertise. Now, Alf has been in the business for nearly 40 years, and there wasn't a thing he didn't know about water or sewage systems, but we often joke that it's pushed everything else out of his head. I think he must have forgotten to lock the door when he headed out, and that's how the kid got in. That said, this was still the first week in March and it was pretty cold, so I'm surprised we didn't notice the draught.

In the end I suppose it doesn't matter. The fact is that Rachel and me had been sat there chatting for maybe five minutes when we noticed we weren't alone. In the doorway leading back to the stairwell stood a thin figure. He looked to be in his late teens, I'd guess. He was dressed all in black, with heavy looking boots and a T-shirt with the logo of some band emblazoned on it, Megadon or Mastodon, or something like that. His hair was long and greasy, almost down to his shoulders, and looked to be dyed almost the

same black as his clothes. He did not look like he was supposed to be skulking round the Reform Club, but I'd encountered more than one member whose rich children were going through a 'rebellious period', so couldn't be entirely sure. I decided to be gentle in my initial enquiries and asked him if he was lost, told him this part of the basement was off-limits due to renovations.

The kid shook his head and asked if we'd found anything yet. Any of "Leitner's pages". Now this took me aback a bit. I wondered how long he'd been standing there, because Rachel and I had just been talking about the man. Jurgen Leitner was a businessman from Norway, I believe, who used to have offices in the ground floor of the building next to the Reform Club, 100 Pall Mall. I don't know what his business was, but when I was first getting started, back in '87, we got a call from Mr. Leitner, requesting a consultation in his Pall Mall office. Back then it was just me and Rachel, and we mostly did stone restoration and alteration, so we assumed Mr. Leitner wanted our opinion on a property outside of London. Our reputation back then was not sufficient to get us access to any of the sort of Central London buildings we now work on.

When we first met Jurgen Leitner, he looked very much like I had imagined him. Portly, middle-aged, short blond hair in the middle of going grey, well-tailored business suit. His office surprised me, though, as it was almost completely bare, save for a desk and two chairs in front of it. There were no tables or bookshelves or filing cabinets or anything like that. He asked us to sit down, and though he spoke with a very faint accent, his English was perfect. We made

small talk, but he seemed impatient, eager to talk about whatever it was he wanted us to do.

I asked him what the job was, and he stopped and looked at us closely. Then he said he simply wanted us to dig a hole. An unusual request, but not an unreasonable one, so I asked him whereabouts this was going to be. He rose, walked over to the corner and pointed at the floor. He said he needed a hole put through the floor. I thought there would have been a basement under there, and he said no, the building's basement didn't go under these rooms. He smiled an odd little smile as he said it, which put me a bit on edge.

Now, there was no way we could do a job like that without the building owner's permission and I told Leitner this. He began to get shifty, then, and tried to tell us that he already had that permission. When we told him we'd need to confirm it with the commercial landlord, he got very defensive, told us that it was fine and he'd need to discuss it with some other contractors first. When we told him we'd just need to have a quick phone call with the owner, he started screaming that we didn't understand what we were talking about, that he didn't need to explain himself to the likes of us, and there were some things that were too important, too powerful to be owned. Then he just started yelling at us in Norwegian until we left. We didn't bother contacting the owners of 100 Pall Mall, in the end.

It was without a doubt the weirdest interview with a prospective client that we'd ever had, and being so close to the site of it had Rachel and I reminiscing when this teenage burnout turned up. I asked him if he'd been eavesdropping, and he shrugged, and again

asked what we had found. I was just about done with this kid, and started to tell him that he was going to have to leave, when Rachel interrupted me and asked what there was to find. The kid laughed, as though he and Rachel were in on some private joke. “Can you smell it?” he said, and for a brief moment, I could smell something. Damp old stone and musty paper, just a faint whiff. It took me off guard, and I think that was why I just stood there as he walked past me and picked up the hammer. He strode over to one of the walls and, with a swing stronger than I would have thought possible from his age and skinny frame, he buried it into the wall. I heard a scream, high-pitched, but it definitely didn’t come from any of us.

This was enough to break me out of my stupor and I ran over and wrestled the hammer from the kid. He struggled and flailed, though he didn’t say anything. As I tried to calm him down, Rachel called over me, and I looked at where he’d hit the wall. In the centre of it was a neat hole; the other side was darkness. There shouldn’t have been anything behind the wall except foundation, but it didn’t look like this was a real basement wall. I let the kid go and walked over to get a closer look. Rachel started to examine it with her tools, before she confirmed what I’d already guessed – that it was a fake. It looked like someone had blocked off a passage, and then very carefully disguised it.

It was at this point Alf returned, and we had some considerable explaining to do. Through it all the kid, who said his name was Gerard, just sat their sullenly, listening to his CD player and waiting. When we asked him how he knew what was behind that

wall he just shrugged, and told us that his mother knows all about this stuff. He didn't elaborate as to what "this stuff" might have been.

We should have waited until morning and told the Reform Club staff what we'd found. We should have handed Gerard over to the police, but Alf was always too curious for his own good, and he suggested we have a look inside. Rachel and I half-heartedly tried to argue against it, but I think deep down we wanted to know just as much as he did. So in we went.

Knocking through the rest of the wall didn't take long. It had been built to look like the rest of the basement, but hadn't been constructed with the same skill. Ten minutes later our coffees lay forgotten on the floor and we stood before a passageway leading off into the musty darkness. A gentle breeze blew from this entrance, which didn't make any sense at all. We had plenty of torches, as you often need them during night work, so we each took one large one and a smaller back-up in case the first had any problems. We tried to tell Gerard to stay outside, but I could see immediately that, short of tying him up, there was no way we were going to keep him out of there. Tying him up did feel like a step too far, so we settled for keeping a close eye on him as we went inside.

The passageway was cold, and the air thick with mildew, but the stone walls were in very good condition. Rachel said it looked to be from the mid-19th century, probably remains of the basement of the Carlton Club, which used to be located in what was now 100 Pall Mall. It was with a start I realised that she was right, based on

where the corridor was going, we must have been underneath the building. Almost exactly where Jurgen Leitner had wanted us to dig almost fifteen years ago.

We walked for some time, longer than I would have expected, given how big I remembered the building above us being. Alf kept asking Rachel if the corridor was getting narrower, and every time, she would dutifully measure the width and inform him that, no, it was exactly five feet wide. I couldn't blame him, really, I've never had any sort of claustrophobia, but I was finding it hard, at points to catch my breath, to dismiss the feeling that the walls were pressing on me. Gerard walked on ahead, seemingly unbothered by the place.

We came to a crossroads. Or, more precisely, a star. The chamber was small, round and featureless, but there were doorways leading out in a circle. I counted thirteen, not including the one we had come in from. Looking down some of them made me feel oddly queasy. There was one that, for all the world, it felt like I was going to fall into it. Another was so dark that our torches didn't seem to reach more than a few feet inside. In the centre, there was a datestone. It read: "Robert Smirke, 1835. Balance and fear".

I don't know how much you know about famous London architects, but Robert Smirke was one of the foremost proponents of the Gothic Revival in the early 19th century. His work was some of the first to use concrete and cast iron, and often described as 'theatrical', a description that makes a lot of sense when you look at the grand columns of the British Museum – his most famous building. Later, I

would look up a list of his buildings and discover that he had indeed built the Carlton Club building in that exact spot. It had been destroyed in the Second World War, during the Blitz, and the club itself had moved premises, but it looked like the underground foundations, or whatever this place was, had not been damaged.

We stood there for some time as I explained this to the others. It took some time to do so as, with the exception of Gerard, I got the impression that none of us were in any hurry to go down the other tunnels. A deep apprehension seemed to have settled itself in the pit of my stomach; everyone else also seemed to feel it. Then, without warning, Gerard started running full pelt into one of the passages. I'm not sure which one it was of the thirteen. I called for him to come back, but got no reply and Alf took off after him, running into the darkness and quickly turning a corner. Rachel and I looked at each other for a few seconds, but we both knew what we needed to be doing. I followed Alf into the passage, while she headed back down to the entrance to get help.

This tunnel wasn't as dark as some of the others, but it was damper, and the walls seemed oddly slimy. After a few yards, the stone became so slick that I found it hard to keep my footing and I fell. I put my hand onto the floor to push myself up, and it came away faintly tinged with red. I heard Alf cry out from further down the corridor. He sounded utterly terrified, and I started on towards him again. I saw lights from up ahead, and was about to call out when Gerard came running back out of the darkness.

He was clutching a book in his hands, and clearly wasn't paying

attention to where he was going. He barrelled right into me, knocking me to the floor again. He was only a skinny kid, but he was so strong, and kept his footing, disappearing back into the darkness, towards the entrance. As he passed, I heard a small clattering sound, as though something were falling behind him. I reached out slowly, to try and raise myself off the ground, and felt something small and oddly smooth lying there. I shined my light on it, and saw a small bone. From a bird, I think, or maybe a rat. I looked around and there were a few more scattered about the corridor.

I'd fallen harder this time, and had managed to hurt my knee quite badly. I was just about able to limp to the end of the corridor, and there I found a small, round room. Against the walls were old bookshelves, decayed and empty, save for a few mouldering pages. They were stained and rotten, and one of them looked like it had a mummified hand laying on it. In front of it, in almost the centre of the room, lay Alf. He was dead. I couldn't see any injuries on him. He didn't even seem hurt. But looking at how still he lay there, the terrified, awful expression frozen on his face, there was no chance he was alive. On his motionless chest, and around the base of the bookshelf, I saw more of those tiny bones.

That's where my memory begins to blur. I know I made it back to the basement of the Reform Club, where Rachel was waiting with the police. But I think I got some of the wrong passageways first. I have the vaguest memories: flashes of a pile of paper, completely covered in cobweb; a figure stood in the darkness, a stranger I

didn't know but was sure meant me harm; my skin burning, hot, choking on smoke down there in the dark.

When I was out, I was questioned by the police, who followed Rachel in to retrieve Alf's body and were successful, though they came back out pale and shaking. There was no sign of Gerard, nor had Rachel seen him. I was then questioned again by the staff of the Reform Club, who instructed us in no uncertain terms to rebuild the wall and finish our original job. We were given to understand that the police were handling the matter, and if we pursued it closer then we would not be getting any further work from members of the club. As this covers almost everybody who can afford our services, we complied. It makes me feel sick, though, like we're just abandoning Alf, dishonouring his memory. It's not even like he had any family to miss him, it just feels wrong. I guess, maybe, that's why I'm talking to you. Do try to keep my name out of it if you follow it up though, okay?

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

On the one hand, this statement represents a complete dead end, as no-one involved is both able and willing to talk to us. Over the last three months Sasha has attempted to contact Mr. Silvana, Rachel Turley, the management of the Reform Club and any of the police officers involved. All of them flatly deny any of this ever took place. Alfred Bartlett's death was listed as a heart attack suffered during routine maintenance work, and none of the coroner's reports

provide any details out of the ordinary. The “kid”, who I think it is reasonable to assume is none other than Gerard Keay, remains just as impossible to contact as he ever was. From an evidence standpoint, this case is a complete bust.

However, too many of the names and features match with other statements for me to dismiss it, not to mention the fact that business records do list Jurgen Leitner as having hired out an office on the ground floor of 100 Pall Mall between 1985 and 1994. He was apparently one of the premier worldwide dealers in rare and antique books at the time, with items selling for the sort of sums where an office in Pall Mall doesn’t raise any eyebrows. If this strange basement is really there, then perhaps his choice of location was not simply a display of status. Clearly some of his books were there, and I can’t help but wonder whether that was where they were found, or just where they were stored.

The other major point of interest is the fact that this complex appears to have been designed by Robert Smirke. You should have seen Tim’s face when I told him. Architecture is one of his specialist areas, and he has always talked of Smirke as one that fascinates him. How did he phrase it? “A master of subtle stability.” From a professional standpoint, it also interests him that Smirke’s buildings have higher percentages of reported paranormal sightings than any other architect of similar profile. He hasn’t been able to find much out about the Carlton Club specifically, at least not anything relevant to this statement. In his later years, following Smirke’s official retirement in 1845, there were all sorts of rumours about his

interests and religious preferences. If there was a scandalous sect or bizarre cult, his name would always be seen mentioned among those meeting with them. He also started putting his name forward to design churches, despite his claimed retirement. He was never taken up on these offers. Interesting, but fundamentally not that useful for the case in hand, especially since we have been unable to get permission to physically investigate whether this place even exists. It seems we've reached something of a dead end. No pun intended.

End recor – Urgh! Goddamn it!

[SOUND OF METAL CANISTER BEING KNOCKED]

Martin!

[DOOR OPENS]

Martin, where did you put the rest of the extinguishers? Martin!

[SOUND DISAPPEARS INTO DISTANCE]

[SILENCE, FOLLOWED BY HEAVY FOOTFALLS]

MARTIN

John, did you call fo–

BREEKON

‘scuse us.

HOPE

Looking for the Archivist.

MARTIN

I’m sorry, are you two meant –

BREEKON

Won’t take up your time.

HOPE

Just got a delivery.

MARTIN

Look, you really can’t actually –

BREEKON

Package for Jonathan Sims.

HOPE

Says right here.

MARTIN

Well, I don’t really know where he –

HOPE

We'll just leave it with you.

BREEKON

Be sure he gets it.

MARTIN

Okay, I will, but you really have to actually –

BREEKON

'course. Much obliged.

HOPE

Stay safe.

MARTIN

…I'll try?

BREEKON

Your recorder's on, by the way.

HOPE

Might want to change that.

MARTIN

Oh… so it is. Thanks.

BREEKON

No problem.

HOPE

At all.

[HEAVY FOOTSTEPS RECEDE]

[CLICK]

MAG036 – Taken Ill

Statement #0121911

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Nicole Baxter, regarding visits culminating in the fire that consumed Ivy Meadows Care Home in Woodley, Greater Manchester. Original statement given November 19th, 2012. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Fear is a strange thing, isn't it? What you're afraid of. For most people, a corpse is at the least unnerving and, for some, outright terrifying. Or maybe it's disgust. They are two very different feelings, aren't they? Though they often bleed into each other, if you'll pardon the pun. I work as a funeral director, so as you can imagine, how I feel about death and the body is a bit more… complicated and more immediately relevant than it is for most people. Dealing with cadavers day in, day out forces you to confront all manner of things about yourself.

Simply put, I have found that I do not believe in any sort of afterlife. I have seen people cold and lifeless upon the mortician's table who I knew, who I remembered as vibrant and lively. There was no soul that had departed, no special spark that passed on to something else. Simply a body that no longer moved or spoke or thought. It feels odd to consider the fact that you will no longer exist some day, but you didn't exist for billions of years before your birth, so, it doesn't seem unreasonable to conclude that you will not exist afterwards in much the same way. I try to see life as a pleasant holiday from non-existence. It provides some comfort when the truth of my own mortality stares me in the face every day.

There is one thing about dead bodies that does bother me, though. One thing that… eats at me, as it were, and does give me that sick tightness of fear deep in my gut. It is rot. I don't know why it gets to me so; perhaps it's precisely because I don't think there is anything beyond the body, and even dead and unaware, seeing a person's form begin to putrefy and fester – becoming just a home for the crawling, feasting things – is too much for me. Perhaps it's just an unaccountable phobia. Regardless of the reason, the fact is that to see the corpses decaying, to see their flesh corrupted, it is… the one part of this job that I find uncomfortable. So much so that I would describe reconstruction and preservation as my favourite part of the process. Making sure the cadaver looks as peaceful and lifelike as possible. Make them the person they were, or as close as they can be while cold and senseless. Fighting off the rot. The insects. The disease.

I don't know why I wrote disease just then. They're dead, so they can't be diseased in the normal sense, can they? I suppose it's just thinking about what happened at the Ivy Meadows Care Home links them in my head. But it's not just that, is it? That… the fear, the feeling. That tingling, squirming fear at the back of my mind – it feels the same when thinking of the germs that corrupt and twist our bodies, lurking invisibly on any table or surface, or when I saw those swarming flies. How many more moved and buzzed just out of sight? I've never had any mental health issues before, but perhaps after my experience I should consult someone. I read once that OCD can come on later in life, if a severe experience sets it off.

I'm rambling. Disregard this first page, I'll start again.

I work as a mortician at Baxter and Gordon Funeral Directors in Woodley. By rights it should now just be Baxter Funeral Directors, as William Gordon passed away himself about 5 years ago, leaving my uncle George running the place on his own. He kept the name though, as he always said it was one of the most respected in all of Manchester. God knows there was no sentimental reason to keep it. From the way he talked, he and William Gordon hated each other by the end, to the point where the will expressly stated that the body of William Gordon was to be handled and prepared by Fenchurch and Sons, one of my uncle's great rivals. Maybe that's why Uncle George is so keen to keep it in the family. He hired me and my cousin Josh to help, and now Baxter and Gordon Funeral Directors is entirely run by Baxters.

I've been there for almost four years now and have taken over most

of the client-side arrangements of the business. My uncle has gotten somewhat brusque in his old age and is now more suited to organising things with churches and crematoria, rather than handling the recently bereaved. As such, I've gotten to know the various nursing and care homes around Woodley rather well. We generally get a few removals from any given one each year. Maybe as many as a half dozen if the winter is bad. It's certainly our most reliable source of business.

Of them all, Ivy Meadows was my favourite. For a funeral director to say she has a favourite nursing home probably sounds a bit like the Grim Reaper talking about his favourite hospital, but it's true. Ivy Meadows Care Home was on the outskirts of Woodley, where the suburbs gave way to pockets of green countryside. It wasn't remote, exactly, but it was removed enough from the main road that it stood alone, surrounded by rather lovely gardens on three sides, and a long, open field behind it. It had been a country house once, I believe, but not much of the original structure remains, having been modified and expanded to provide accessible accommodation for about thirty residents. It was an odd building, with modern glass and concrete sections sprouting from old turreted brickwork, like blocky stone tumours.

The look of the place wasn't why I liked it, though. No, that was the residents. Ivy Meadows was almost entirely populated by those elderly who were entirely supported by the state. Most pensioners have some savings or property or family to support them, which means if they're unable to live alone they can at least afford to pay

for their own care or some of it. It's rare for a person to reach that age and have literally nothing to pay for their care, but it does happen. In these cases, the state pays for them, but they have little choice in where they end up. Ivy Meadows was almost entirely populated by these. Old people without money or family, sent to be looked after by strangers. You'd have expected the atmosphere to be unpleasant, some morbid combination of prison and hospice, but it was quite the opposite. Something about the mutual loneliness seemed to lead them to create a real sense of community. It was the only place I ever went where the residents still gave me a smile. Hannah Ramirez, who ran the place, would always tell me a bit about the deceased and their time there, and I was inevitably shocked by tales of drugs, sexual escapades and other gossip that sounded more like a high school than a nursing home. I think Hannah enjoyed trying to get a reaction out of me when I was trying to be solemn. It was just a happy place, even if I was only there to do a sad duty.

It all started to change about three months ago, after Hannah left. I don't know exactly when she left her post or why; we hadn't had a call from Ivy Meadows for a couple of months, so it must have happened during that period. I don't know where she moved to, either. It certainly wasn't any of the other care homes around Woodley, and it wasn't like I knew her personally. I'd gotten a call from one of the nurses, Alenka Kozel, who said that one of their residents had taken ill and passed away, a man by the name of Bertrand Miller. I asked her for a few more details; she started to say something else, but the call was cut off almost abruptly. I didn't

really think too much about it, most of the details could be worked out when we arrived, so I called Josh and loaded up the car for a removal.

It was a hot mid-August day, and the air was thick and humid, making everything feel sticky, like the whole world was running a fever. The sky was overcast, though, an orangey-grey that cast muted shadows and seemed to muffle the world. It was about a ten minute drive to Ivy Meadows, and neither of us said a word. I don't know why, at that point we had no idea that there was anything wrong, but looking back it seems like we both felt there was something off about it. Or maybe we were just too hot for conversation and hindsight is colouring my memories.

When we arrived the place was silent. There were no cars in the parking area, which was not unusual, but I couldn't see a soul anywhere on the grounds. Maybe they were simply staying out of the heat. Josh and I got out of the car and approached the door. I pressed the buzzer, as I had done so many times before, expecting the cheery voice of one of the receptionists. Instead there was just dead air, followed by the clunk of the door being remotely unlocked. I looked at Josh, who shrugged, and we went inside.

Ivy Meadows Care Home was usually much as you would find any other – air conditioned, and smelling faintly of cleaning products and cheap potpourri. This time it was different. The smell now was just as faint, but seemed… rancid, while the air itself was close and damp. The beige walls seemed dirtier than before, with dark marks at roughly hand-height. There was a faint buzzing, like a fly, but I

couldn't see any source for it.

None of it was so bad as to make us turn back, however, and we headed towards the reception desk. There was nobody behind it, and I rang the bell. I always wore gloves when on a removal, and was glad of that fact now, as I noticed a greasy residue on top of the small brass bell. The door to the reception opened, and a tall man stepped out. He was rail thin and wore a faded brown suit that seemed to have been cut for a much fatter man. His eyes were a watery blue and his dark hair stood on top of his head in an unruly mess. He must have been around forty, but had a nervous sort of energy to him. He was quite a surprise, to say the least.

Josh recovered faster than I did and asked the man, a bit rudely, who he was, where we could find Hannah. The man shook his head at this and said that Ms. Ramirez had left the position, and he was now Director of Ivy Meadows. He introduced himself as John Amherst, and held a hand out for Josh to shake. My cousin stood there for some time, staring at the thick, sweaty hand of this strange man, clearly not wanting to shake it. Mr. Amherst just stood there, arm outstretched, apparently unconcerned. A fly landed on his face, and if he noticed, he didn't give any sign of it, not even when it walked across his eye. Eventually, the now clearly shaken Josh stuttered out some semi-polite excuse and backed away.

At this John Amherst lowered his hand and turned to me. He asked why we were here. This took me rather by surprise, as there's generally only one reason undertakers show up in such a place. We told him we had received a call and been told Mr. Miller had passed

away. Amherst asked who had called us, but with such a sharpness in his voice that I lied and said the caller hadn't given their name. He paused, clearly considering what to say next very carefully. Finally, he nodded, and said that yes, Bertrand Miller was dead. And we could have him. Then he gestured for us to follow and began to walk back into the main building.

As we walked, he began listing the details for Mr. Miller's funeral, such as they were. No family or friends, no savings or insurance, simple cremation, as soon as possible. No service to be held at the crematorium. Ashes to be returned to Ivy Meadows in whatever the cheapest option was for an urn made of brass. At this I asked what he wanted the ashes for, and he simply waved his hand in a vague dismissal and said they'd be wanting to have a "private remembrance service".

By now, we'd been walking for a few minutes, and I hadn't seen another soul in the corridors. I thought I spotted one of the nurses at one point, but they had turned and walked away as soon as they saw us. We arrived at a room bearing a small plaque. It read 'Bertrand Miller'. John Amherst opened it without hesitation and went inside.

The smell was what hit me first. I've smelled plenty of corpses in my time. I'd almost say I'm used to the smell. This was different, there was some deeper taint there than simply putrefying flesh, and it made me gag. By the look on his face, Josh smelled it as well. Then I got a good look at the body on the bed, and almost turned and ran.

Based on the colour of those sections of skin still whole and unblemished, Mr. Miller couldn't have been dead for more than a few hours, half a day at most. You wouldn't have known, though. Large sections of his body were covered in a wet, creamy yellow rash, which… I'm not a doctor, so describing exactly what it did to the flesh it touched would serve no purpose except to start me having the nightmares again. Let us just say that it gave a plentiful home for the flies that swarmed around his body.

We looked at John Amherst, utterly appalled. He said not to worry, that the disease that had claimed poor Mr. Miller wasn't contagious. Even produced the recently signed death certificate, though it was stained with some dark grey fluid, so I did not examine it too closely. He then apologised that their air conditioning had broken. "I'm sure you know all about what heat does to cadavers," he said.

I just wanted to get out of there, and have never been more grateful to whoever designed care home beds so that we could remove the body with as little contact as possible. Even then, on the way out I felt a sudden tickling pain on the back of my left hand, and looked down to see the thick leather glove in contact with one of the patches of yellow. I nearly screamed and dropped the body, but did neither. Ivy Meadows did not feel then like a safe place to do either of those things. In fact, I kept my composure through the whole of the drive home.

As soon as we arrived, I ran into the bathroom, throwing my gloves into the medical waste bin. I scrubbed the patch of skin that still felt like it was crawling. I could see nothing wrong with it, but I

kept scrubbing until it was bloody, then poured disinfectant over it until it went numb.

When I finally left the bathroom, I found Josh arguing loudly with his father. Apparently Uncle George was not satisfied with the explanation given for the state of Mr. Miller's body. He turned to me, and asked what had happened. I told him the same thing Josh had, the same thing I've told you. We went over it slowly, point by point until finally he stood there silently, looking worried, but determined. He had us tell it to him one more time, before he nodded, told us to stay away from the corpse of Bertrand Miller, and left, telling us he had to make a few calls. I have never seen a cremation done with such a quick turnaround, and he was burned before the end of the day. I asked Uncle George about returning the ashes in a brass urn, but he shook his head, and said he'd already had them disposed of.

I knew my uncle wasn't one to share his thoughts when he didn't want to, and that seemed to be the end of it, save for those times throughout the day I would feel that tickling in my hand and run to scrub it away. I went on a couple of other jobs, and it seemed like we were expected to forget it. Josh didn't talk about what happened, and I got the impression he was trying to ignore what he had seen. He always was a practical soul.

I… couldn't let it go, though. It just kept playing in my mind. So when the phone rang two weeks later and I heard Alenka's voice on the other end, my heart skipped several beats. What she said did nothing to allay my fears. The line was bad, very bad, but I could

have sworn she said, “Come quickly. We’ve taken ill. We’ve passed away.” The words repeated, as though on a recorded loop, though they were no easier to make out than the first time. Finally, I put the phone down. I was technically off duty at that point, having just finished my shift, so I could have ignored it. I could have walked away. Instead, I put on my normal clothes, grabbed three pairs of gloves and got in my car.

The drive there was dreadful. Still hot, I kept looking at turnings and junctions, and imagining where I would go if I turned away from Ivy Meadows and just drove off. But I didn’t. I kept taking those old familiar turnings, moving inevitably towards that sick, old building.

When I arrived, it was quiet. The whole building looked filthy now, even from the outside, and the plants that bordered it had started to take on an unhealthy whitish colour. There was one other car in the parking area, a faded white Transit van I didn’t recognise. I got out and started to walk towards the front door. The smell was noticeable even from out here, and by the time I got close enough to reach the buzzer, it had become so strong as to be unbearable. I tried to bring myself to press the button. But instead I turned and half-sprinted back to my car, desperate to breath clean air again.

I stood there, torn between wanting to flee and needing to know. Then in the silence, I heard it. Tap, tap, tap. Someone banging rhythmically on a window. I scanned all the ones I could see, but they were dark.

Tap, tap, tap.

It showed no sign of stopping. I began to make a wide circuit of the building. It was on the other side that I saw it. A large, ground floor window showed what I think would once have been the lounge. The walls were dark, stained and smeared to almost black, but the windows were clear. Stood the other side of the glass, weakly banging her fist against it, was Alenka Kozel. Her skin was mottled, covered with that leaking yellow rash. She saw me, and as her eyes locked with mine she opened her mouth, and the buzzing of the flies that spewed out was almost as loud as her scream.

I turned and began to sprint back towards my car. I had to get away, to get out. Then, without warning, I felt something heavy hit me in the side and I lost my footing, falling to the ground. I looked up to see an old man pinning me to the ground, his long, white beard matted and filthy. I screamed and tried to escape, but his age seemed to have done nothing to diminish his strength, and he kept his grip easily.

Then he spoke in a thick Mancunian accent and told me to keep my voice down. I noticed that his skin was unblemished pink, and behind him stood a young woman, tall and lean with close-cropped hair and a deep scar over her right eye. She carried a large canvas bag, and was shaking her head, telling the old man to leave me alone. After a few suspicious glances, he got up. I could swear I recognised him from somewhere, but when I asked the two of them who they were, they just shook their heads and told me to leave. I asked them what was going on, and the old man looked at his

companion, as if asking permission, said something about knowledge being a good defence here. She shook her head and said that leaving quickly was a better one. I didn't need to be told a third time.

I got in my car, and I left them to their work. I didn't turn around even when I saw the smoke start to rise behind me. And that was the last time I went there. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go wash my hands.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

The Ivy Meadows Care Home in Woodley was officially decommissioned in July 2011, a month before the first of these alleged calls came in. It burned down on the 4th of September that same year after a leaking gas main caught fire. If the gas was already leaking, this might have resulted in hallucinations or other problems during their initial visit. There is no record of the body of Bertrand Miller being processed, or cremated, by Baxter and Gordon Funeral Directors, but based on this statement that's not necessarily a point of incredulity. Bertrand Miller was a resident at Ivy Meadows, but according to his death certificate he passed away on 19th July, a week before the home was decommissioned. There's no record of any funeral arrangements or disposal of the body.

In fact, it seems the records from the closure of Ivy Meadows are… well, according to Sasha, calling them 'patchy' would be very

generous. There are only transfer records for seven residents, whereas at last official count the home held twenty-nine. The others seem to have been lost in the system somewhere. The majority of the workforce also appears to be undocumented, and I can find no record of any ‘Alenka Kozel’ on the system. Martin’s research would seem to indicate the place employed a reasonable number of international staff they preferred to keep off the books, but it doesn’t explain why none of the officially-listed staff can be located for follow-up, except for Hannah Ramirez, whose brief interview simply established she moved to Brighton shortly before the closure of Ivy Meadows and hadn’t heard anything about it since. John Amherst, as best we can tell, doesn’t exist. We’re unable to locate anyone fitting that description anywhere within the care or medical sector, and he certainly never ran any nursing homes.

Another tale full of dead ends. We did contact the Baxters. Joshua Baxter repeated the first part of the above statement. George Baxter told us not to listen to tall tales. Nicole Baxter said she stands by her account, but aside from losing her left hand in what she calls “a workplace accident”, there have been no further developments.

Still, there’s a lot here that puts me in mind of other statements. Something in the way Ms. Baxter talks about fear. I can’t help but be reminded of statement 0142302, how Jane Prentiss talks about her own fears. And the old man and his companion… who does that remind me of? If he wasn’t dead, I’d think it might have been Trevor –

[DOOR OPENS]

Oh, er, yes?

TIM

Are you free?

ARCHIVIST

Yes… Yes, I'm just about finished here, what is it?

TIM

Oh, ah, nothing urgent, um, it's just Elias was asking a couple questions about the delivery.

ARCHIVIST

Delivery? What delivery?

TIM

Ah well, that's actually what he was asking, huh! Um, apparently Martin, uh, took delivery of a couple of items last week addressed to you. Did he not mention it?

ARCHIVIST

No, he… Oh, yes, actually. I completely forgot. He said he put it in my desk drawer, hold on.

[SOUND OF PACKAGE BEING RETRIEVED AND OPENED]

TIM

Er, what is it?

ARCHIVIST

A lighter. An old Zippo.

TIM

You smoke?

ARCHIVIST

No. And I don't allow ignition sources in my archive!

TIM

Okay. Is there anything unusual about it?

ARCHIVIST

Not really. Just a sort of spider web design on the front. Doesn't mean anything to me. You?

TIM

Ah no. No.

ARCHIVIST

Well… show it to the others, see what they think. You said there

was something else as well?

TIM

Oh, ah yes, yeah, it was sent straight to the Artefact Storage, a table of some sort. Ah, looks old. Quite pretty, though. Fascinating design on it.

ARCHIVIST

Tim… Tim, it doesn't have a hole in it, does it? About six inches square?

TIM

Ah… I don't know. Maybe? Um, I'll be honest I didn't really notice. It was quite –

ARCHIVIST

Hypnotic, yes. Do you know who made the delivery? Did they sign in?

TIM

Um… ah no, ah, sorry, no, I don't know.

ARCHIVIST

I need to talk to Martin. Uh, end recording.

[CLICK]

MAG037 – Burnt Offering

Statement #0090608

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Tell me again.

MARTIN

Again?

ARCHIVIST

I want it on tape.

MARTIN

What? Why?

ARCHIVIST

I just want a record. To make sure I have something I can check.

MARTIN

Okay, fine. There were two delivery men. They were big, and they spoke with cockney accents that might have been fake, and they delivered a package for you. I don't remember anything else about

what they looked like.

ARCHIVIST

Nothing at all?

MARTIN

[Exasperated] They looked normal. Like you'd expect. They looked like two, huge, cockney delivery men. I don't know what else you want?

ARCHIVIST

What about the table?

MARTIN

I didn't see the table. I guess Rosie must have signed for it. I mean, it's her office on the way to Artefact Storage, that makes sense.

ARCHIVIST

She says the same as you. Two men, doesn't know how they got in, too intimidated to ask, looked "exactly like you'd expect". Useless…

MARTIN

Sorry… Look, John, I do think we should destroy the table, though. I mean, if it's the one from Amy Patel's statement. Just in case.

ARCHIVIST

Elias told me the same thing. Luckily he phrased it as advice rather than an instruction, so for now I'm more inclined to keep studying it. We're not in the business of destroying knowledge.

MARTIN

I suppose. Can I go now?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, go on.

MARTIN

Thank you.

[DOOR OPENS]

Look, you need to get some sleep.

…

I'll see you later.

[DOOR CLOSES]

ARCHIVIST

Waste of tape, really. He's right. Might as well get some use out of it.

Statement of Jason North, regarding the discovery of an alleged

ritual site found near Loch Glass in Scotland. Original statement given August 6th, 2009. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I just need to know if you can save my son. I've asked and asked and your people only ever tell me to write my statement. Put it down on paper for investigation. Is that going to help? No. Of course it isn't. Even if you had the power to do something, would you? Or would you rather watch my son burn so you can take notes.

I've been drinking. You can probably tell from the stains. Well, I don't plan to apologise for ruining your precious paper, and I don't plan to stop. Only way to keep the fear from settling in. If I'm scared I'm going to lose Ethan like I lost everything else, then I'll curl into a ball and never get up. I won't be able to do anything to stop it. I won't let my son burn, even if you cowards don't have the guts to step up and do something.

I'm sorry. I know. There's no-one to blame by my own stupid self. Blundering in where I had no right to go. But yes, I know, you want the whole goddamn story, don't you? So you can look over it in ten years and go "Hmm, interesting" long after Ethan and me are dead. Well, fine. There's not much to it, really. For everything it's done to me, I didn't really do anything at all. Just messed around in the

wrong clearing.

I'm an ecologist. Was an ecologist. Working for the Forestry Commission up in Scotland. It was a great job. For me, at least. I suppose if you don't like hiking or being alone you'd have a hard time with it, but for me it was a great fit. Now, up in the north of Scotland, the bit without all the people, there are plantations of evergreen trees. Huge ones. And their job is the same as pretty much any other tree – to get cut down for wood. Trouble is, a lot of animals make their homes in and around those trees. Badgers, red squirrels, even pine martens. Do you know what a pine marten is? It's a wee bear. An adorable wee bear that needs to be protected. Because the pine marten, like a lot of other species that live in those areas, is protected by conservation laws; can't be legally killed without the sort of special permissions logging companies rarely have. So it was my job to walk through all these plantations with a clipboard and note down what animals had made their homes where.

You don't need me to tell you that the job can take me a long way from civilisation at times. Some of these plantations are… off the beaten track. Everyone gets so caught up on how small Scotland is compared to other countries, but it's still huge compared to a single idiot wandering through the forests. And there aren't so many people, so you have large areas all but devoid of human life. It wasn't uncommon for me to find myself an hour or more away from a town or main road or any other human life at all. I didn't mind being alone, though, because I knew I had my little boy Ethan

waiting for me back at home. Four years old and already sharp as anything. And my wife Lucy. She used to be waiting for me as well.

You see… plenty of strange things out here. That far from anywhere, a lot of folks use it as their own personal dumping grounds. Fridges, microwaves, barbed wire, all sorts. Occasionally strewn throughout the forests and over the hills. I even found a corpse once. Not as exciting as it sounds – they were far too decomposed for me to tell anything about the death. Could have been a mafia hit or could have been a hiker having a heart attack. Result was the same for me: radio it in and then lose two hours of light babysitting a dead guy while I wait for someone to get up and take charge of it.

So when I saw the clearing in the trees near Loch Glass I wasn't worried. I figured I'd seen everything messed up the forest had to offer. Heck, I even saw a friend of mine get impaled on a falling tree once. I reckoned there was nothing left to shock me. It didn't matter that the hairs on my arm began to stand up, or that I started sweating through my coat in the middle of February, or that that dry acrid taste at the back of my throat made me want to gag. I still headed on over to investigate this odd-looking clearing.

It wasn't man made, or at least nobody had cut trees down to make it. It looked as though the trees had been deliberately planted in a circle. If that was the case, judging by their growth they must have been planted like that almost fifty years ago. In the centre was a large piece of stone, crudely hacked into what looked like a small seat or… maybe an altar. As I stood there on the edge, I realised the

trees around me were completely silent, and after a few seconds of examination saw that it didn't look like there were any animals at all around this clearing. It was… unsettling, sure, but it also meant that I had all the information I needed for my survey of that area. I could tick the boxes and move on. I didn't need to enter the clearing. But I did.

The moment I crossed that threshold I knew I had made a mistake. It was like an electric shock rushing through my body, and my already warm skin began to prickle and burn. I stripped off my jacket with sweat dripping from my fingers, and reached for my water to try and get rid of that foul taste in my throat. I pulled the cap off and took a long swig… half a second before I realised the water was boiling hot. I screamed; well, it was more a gurgle, really, and fell to the floor in agony.

I lay there for almost half an hour, collecting myself and just breathing in the cold winter air of the Highlands, waiting for the pain to die down. Eventually, I managed to compose myself and stagger to my feet. The strange sensations were still there, but I was able to mostly choke them down, at least until I had a proper look around the clearing. The altar was the focus of the whole thing, but in many ways it was the least interesting part. Clean, smooth stone. No markings of any sort, nothing on top. Just… a rock. Around it, though, on the ground, were scorch marks. They didn't seem to radiate out from any one angle, they just covered areas of the forest floor. There was no ash, though, or debris, or anything that might have meant a fire, just the burn marks.

It was following these scorches that led me to the really messed up stuff, because what I saw around the edges of the clearing put them to shame. See, it looked like there were animals in that place once, but now each one lay just beyond the edge. On all of them, the fur or feathers had been burned away, and all that was left was their skin, scalded a vivid, angry red, like they'd been badly sunburned. They were dead, every one of them, though none seemed to have decayed any more than their compatriots. Either they had all died together, or something in that place was keeping them fresh. Neither option sounded grand to me.

Finally, I looked at the trees. There was nothing wrong with the trees themselves, not exactly. Driven into the trunk of each one was a heavy-looking iron nail. I didn't count how many there were in total, maybe a couple dozen. Each suspended a worn and dirt-caked glass milk bottle that had clearly seen better days. My eyes fell on the string used to suspend them, and I couldn't help but notice it seemed far cleaner and newer than the bottles or their contents.

What was inside each one seemed to vary, some had pine needles and twigs, some were full of dirt, and one or two even held what appeared to be rainwater, though looking closer I could see that it bubbled very gently inside those bottles in an endless simmer. In each I could also see a small photograph, half-buried in dirt or almost boiled clean. They all looked to be the same photograph, though it was hard to tell for sure. An old woman, probably in her fifties or sixties, wearing reading glasses and grey hair curled into a tight bun. She stared out disapprovingly from every bottle.

Weirdest of all, on the bottom of each was tied a lock of hair. It was long and grey, in poor condition, and I reckon it must have belonged to the woman in the photograph. It was tied up with the same new string as held the bottles, except for the fact that it was burned, ever so slightly, at the ends.

I was still in quite a lot of pain from the water earlier, but I've always been too curious for my own stupid good. I took a few pictures on my phone, but I wanted some clear shots of the photograph inside to show my friends. God knows I should have just left; it's not like there weren't plenty of warning signs. I just chose not to pay attention. I picked up one of the jars filled with twigs and took it off the nail, trying to angle it in my hand to get a better shot of the contents.

Then my fingers slipped and I dropped it. I watched it plummet towards the hard winter ground, willing it not to shatter, not to break. It was falling so slowly, but I was even slower. It exploded into a thousand glass shards and instantly I knew that I had meddled with something I should have left alone. I turned tail and ran, stopping only to reach down and pick up the photograph. I don't know why, I suppose it felt so weird all of a sudden that I didn't think I could get any more cursed. And I wanted a copy of that picture just to prove to myself that what I had found was real. It was real. You can have the damn thing now, though. I'll leave it with my statement. I know in my heart getting rid of it will make no difference, but I have to try.

Because from that moment on, everything I love and value has

burned or been destroyed. My car overheated on the way back to the Forestry Commission, and I barely got out before the engine caught fire. My house was a smouldering heap of blackened rubble before the end of the week. Electrical failure. I don't want to talk about what happened to Lucy. I don't want to think about her face at the end.

Now there's only one thing I have left that I value. That I love. And I cannot lose him. I can't lose Ethan. I shouldn't be in this mess. It's absurd. I didn't do anything wrong. I just dropped a bottle. That's all! I don't deserve this. I don't.

I asked about who might have gone to the area, but aside from some middle-aged businessmen on a hiking trip, no-one's been anywhere near that clearing for years. There is no reason this is happening, but I'm still going to lose everything. I am so scared.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

He didn't, in the end. Lose Ethan, that is. Ethan North is currently a healthy eleven-year-old boy living with a loving foster family in Inverness. They declined to give an interview. I can't say I blame them. The rest is a standard muddle – Tim couldn't find evidence of the clearing, Sasha established all the accidents that befell Mr. North and his loved ones appeared mundane in nature. The set-up of the clearing matches rituals or spells in both voodoo and Wicca, but nothing definitive, and there is no hard evidence of anything

supernatural occurring.

There's no reason to believe that when Jason North doused himself in petrol on August the 10th, 2009, then lit himself on fire, he was doing anything other than acting out the delusions of a paranoid alcoholic. Paramedics took him to Raigmore Hospital, where he died three days later. He never regained consciousness.

I suppose there is **one** piece of evidence. Mr. North did include with his statement the picture he found in the bottle. It is a photograph of Gertrude Robinson, my predecessor at the Magnus Institute, circa 2002, as best I can tell. I have no idea what this means. I have no idea what any of this means. I'm very tired.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG038 – Lost and Found

Statement #0120606

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Andre Ramao, regarding a series of misplaced objects lost over the course of three months. Original statement given June 6th 2012. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Thank you for lending me your pen. I thanked you when you handed it to me, but I don't know if you'll remember. I wonder, will you… forget you lent it to me and believe that it was my pen all along? Maybe instead you'll forget that I ever had one to begin with, and think of me as an idiot who turned up to give a statement without a pen, so you had to lend me yours. My own fault for putting it down, really. Assuming I **did** ever have one. I'll try to keep a slightly closer hold on this one.

I've been in the antiques business for a long time. It's not what it used to be. *[Nervous chuckle]* I'm sorry, I know. I always did that,

try to make myself feel more comfortable with jokes. There's a follow up to that one, you know. Something along the lines of the joke being so old only an antiques dealer would be able to sell it. I love that one; I think it's clever, but in my whole life it's only ever gotten a laugh once. That's why I remember buying the vase so clearly. I remember that the seller laughed.

In the old days, I never would have considered buying wares from the likes of Mikaele Salesa. He has a good reputation for quality, but a… bad reputation for legality, as it were. I've had more than one acquaintance sell on a particularly valuable find they got from him, only to discover that it didn't have proper import papers, or that it had been reported stolen years before. Charlie Miller even did some jail time over a Georgian brooch he bought off him, so as a general rule I'd have given Salesa's stuff a wide berth, but… Well, the antiques business isn't what it used to be. That isn't a joke. I had to close up my shop a few years ago, you see. Actual antiques don't sell to the mass market anymore. Oh, young people will snap up vintage clothes or have any number of cheap faux-antique replicas strewn about their living rooms, but as soon as they get a look at the price tag for the real thing? They're out of there like a shot.

So I went the same way as a lot of my peers. Lose the premises, start selling only high-margin goods direct to specific clients who can afford them, or shift a few guaranteed sellers on the auction. It's the only real way to stay afloat in the business nowadays, but the competition is intense, and getting the calibre of artefact you need has become a more cutthroat affair. I'm not the only one in the

business to recently soften their attitude towards buying from people like Mikaele Salesa.

It was my first meeting with him, back in March, and I was nervous, so I told my joke. Just off-hand, almost a reflex. I didn't expect any reaction, really, I… I certainly didn't expect him to laugh. But he did, this sudden, deep, throaty laugh that seemed to come out of nowhere. He didn't say anything afterwards, just continued discussing business. But it stayed with me. There was nothing particularly strange about the laugh, not really. Why do I remember it so clearly?

Salesa was taking me through his 'showroom'. There was a fancy-looking sign above the door, but it didn't do much to hide the fact that it was basically a warehouse. More of the antiques were still in their packing crates, and I couldn't help making a note of how quick and easy it would be for him to pack everything down and disappear if he needed to. Still, I'd made a few good purchases already and was cautiously optimistic. I'd bought a pair of cavalry sabres from the Revolutionary War, absolutely excellent condition, and a British artilleryman's tunic from World War I, a few other bits and pieces as well. I recall I felt a moment of relief that I didn't deal in books, as I caught sight of several crates packed to the brim with heavy-looking volumes. I was looking for something big, though. Something that would make an actual dent in the mountain of debt I'd been piling up.

I found it in that old Chinese pot. From the Jiajing period, so Salesa said, and the construction seemed to back him up. The glaze and

the workmanship fitted with mid-to-late Ming dynasty, but there was something… off about the actual design. Instead of the pictures or scenes common to the ceramics of the period, the blue glaze was painted on in crisp, thin geometric lines. They repeated perfectly and seemed to get smaller and more intricate the closer I looked, but the shapes they formed never lost any of the precision, seeming to continue on however closely I looked. The effect was disorientating, and made the vase seem smaller than it actually was. It made my head hurt a bit when I looked at it for too long. It was amazing.

When he saw me staring, Salesa clapped me on the back and named a price that almost made me choke. We haggled a bit, and eventually reached a price I considered only a little bit unreasonable. I hurried my purchases home, feeling slightly soiled by my visit to the warehouse, and very much hoping it would be a good few months, if not years, before I was in such dire straits that I needed to go again. I got home, had a shower and some food and immediately started to look into finding a buyer for my latest acquisitions. I remember I was planning to make a few calls, but my headache got so bad that I had to have an early night.

The problems started soon after. It was little things at first. Like my shoes. I'm not a particularly fashion-conscious man at the best of times, so I have three pairs of shoes. Comfortable loafers for everyday use, a pair of walking boots for hiking, and some well-shined, polished, leather brogues for fancier events. Well, I had a rather upmarket auction that I needed to attend, so I went to put on

my nice shoes, but they were nowhere to be found. Not the shoes, not the box I kept them in. Instead there was a bag containing two shirts that I know for a fact I threw away the year before. When I asked my husband, David, about it, he told me point blank that I had never had any such shoes. Claimed I always wore my loafers when I went to auctions or parties.

I know that compared to some of the ghost stories you must hear in this place, a pair of misplaced shoes seems perfectly trivial, but something felt so… wrong about the whole situation. In the end I did go in my loafers. I don't remember if anyone at the auction noticed.

It was about a week later that I got the invoice from Salesa. It was a pleasant surprise, far less than I thought we'd agreed on. That feeling lasted until I looked through the itemised list and realised why the cost was so low. He hadn't charged me for the Ming. I'll admit that I was somewhat conflicted over whether to raise the issue, but in the end I decided that even if Mikaele Salesa did work with thieves, I was not going to be counted among them. So I phoned him to try and explain the mistake.

He seemed to be in a fine mood when he answered the phone, and asked me if I'd had a chance to try out the sabres yet, which I'm pretty sure was a joke. I told him that there was an item he'd missed off the invoice, and he said that no, everything had been double-checked and was correct. I was getting suspicious at this point, and thought he might be trying to pull a fast one of some sort with me, maybe get me to take the blame for some illicit scheme

gone wrong. I told him so in no uncertain terms, and described our encounter and the vase in minute detail. He was quiet for a few seconds, and then asked me if I could send him a photo of the pot. His tone was different, and he sounded oddly wary when he made the request. I was very on edge by this point, but could come up with no good reason not to agree, so I took a few pictures with my phone and sent them through to him.

It was a long time before he spoke again, and when he did he sounded… different. Almost scared, I thought. He told me that I could keep it. No charge. I began to protest again, but he ignored it. I remember his exact words: "I do not remember having that thing, which means it belongs to you." Then he hung up.

This was all very strange, of course, but even then I wasn't worried. Not like I should have been.

It was my book next. A signed copy of *Catch-22,* my favourite book. Vanished from its place on my bookshelf, leaving only an empty space behind. David just gave me another blank stare when I asked him about it. I admit I almost lost it at him then. Shoes were one thing, but that book meant a lot to me. I accused him of playing some stupid joke, and tried to remind him what I'd gone through to get it, flying over to America for Joseph Heller's last book tour, queuing for hours and then that dreadful evening I thought that sudden rainstorm had ruined it all. By the end he was looking… very alarmed indeed and started to ask me how I was feeling. He wanted to know if I'd been under a lot of stress at work, if there was anything I wanted to talk about. I left.

Maybe he was right. Maybe I am crazy. It makes a lot more sense, doesn't it? It would make it neat. Except no. No, I would need to have gone mad a long, long time before this for the idea of it being in my head to hold up. My perceptions are the only ones I can trust. Maybe. I don't know.

This went on for months. The tie I got for my last birthday, my grandfather's teapot, the tunic I bought from Salesa, things just kept going missing, and every time David would tell me that whatever it was didn't exist. Or it wasn't mine. Or I was misremembering. For a while I thought he was actually trying to gaslight me, make me think I was losing my mind, but when the tunic went missing, I called Salesa again. This time he laughed when he told me that he didn't remember selling any World War I items to me on my visit. I checked the invoice, and it was no longer listed there. Just empty, accusing paper where the words had been.

I know these things were real. I know they existed. Why won't anyone just believe me?

This is where I started to come undone a bit. To be honest, I don't think anyone would do much better in my situation. I hadn't made any connection between the old Chinese pot and the disappearances. I mean, why would I? But I also hadn't been able to sell it. Whenever I tried, something would get in the way. The other person would forget to send through a crucial email, or they'd stop responding. Once I managed to get it as far as posting it out to a buyer, but it was returned immediately with a note asking why it had been sent to her. Gradually, I began to get suspicious of the

thing. Sitting there, with its cascading, maddening patterns in that vile cobalt blue. Trying to tell me that I things didn't exist, that they hadn't vanished when I know they have.

I took to watching it. I wasn't getting much sleep and David was worried sick about me. I know he was talking to various doctors about getting me help. There were certainly a couple of points I was worried about him having me sectioned. None of it helps in the end.

It was about a month ago. I had placed the vase in the centre of the table, and was sat staring at it. Keeping an eye on it. Checking for… god knows what. This had been my ritual for the previous week, keeping my vigil into the small hours, but that night… that night I fell asleep in front of it. I don't remember my dream. Running, maybe? I know I woke with a start sometime around 2 in the morning.

As I tried to rub the sleep from my eyes, I heard a sound from the table in front of me. It was the dull thump of a heavy book hitting the tabletop. I looked and, sure enough, there was my copy of *Catch-22,* just lying there in front of that strange ceramic thing. And not just my book, there was a small pile of objects around the base. My shoes, a tie, things I don't even remember losing. One by one they rose up out of the mouth of the vase and tumbled to the table. It didn't matter how big they were, they all seemed to fit.

And then came the moment when everything had been disgorged. I saw all the things that I had lost, and I thought it must be over. It must be done. What else could possibly come of there? And I saw

the pale shapes of long, thin fingertips begin to creep above the lip of the pot. I remember thinking that it couldn't be a normal person living in that pot, because the fingernails were too dirty. Isn't that an odd thing to think at a time like that?

I ran, of course. Turned around and sprinted out of the door and into the street and didn't return until morning. Maybe I should have called the police, but I was in no state to do much of anything except shiver under a tree for hours. David was gone. I allowed myself some brief hope that maybe he'd just left me, maybe he'd escape with just a divorce. But no. One call to the housing association confirmed that, as far as they were concerned, I'd always lived alone.

I want to smash that thing. I want to dash its maddening patterns to the ground and stomp on it until there is nothing left but powder. But it's also disappeared, of course. I can't find it anywhere. It's still taking things, though. Sorry about your pen.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Before I dig too deeply into the background of this statement, I feel I should mention something that puts much of it in a slightly different light. Tim actually managed to find a copy of Mr. Ramao's marriage licence. It exists, is signed, dated and official, and half of it is blank. Only Mr. Ramao's details are on the document, and if it wasn't for the context of this statement, it would appear he was

married to nobody. But he **was** married.

This is not the first time Mikaele Salesa's name has come to the attention of the Institute. Even discounting the incidental role he played in case #0112905, he appears to have something of a knack for locating objects displaying more… disconcerting phenomena. I believe some of the more bizarre things in the Artefact Storage area were purchased from him. It has been something of a –

Urgh. Urgh.

[SOUND OF CHAIR SCRAPING]

I see you…

[THUMP… THEN SOUND OF COLLAPSING SHELVES]

[NOISES OF EXCLAMATION]

[DOOR OPENS]

SASHA

Alright?

ARCHIVIST

Ah… Yeah. A… spider.

SASHA

A spider?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. I tried to kill it…. the shelf collapsed.

SASHA

I swear, cheap shelves are… Did you get it?

ARCHIVIST

Ah… I hope so. Think so. Nasty, bulbous-looking thing.

SASHA

[Chuckles] Well, I won't tell Martin.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, god. I don't think I could stand another lecture on their importance to the ecosystem.

[SHUFFLING NOISES]

What?

SASHA

Look.

ARCHIVIST

Oh… uh… Got dented when the shelf collapsed, I guess.

SASHA

No, it, it goes right through. I, I thought this was an exterior wall?

ARCHIVIST

It should be.

SASHA

Hmm. I, I think it's just plasterboard.

[LOW NOISES OF DEBRIS]

Do you see anything?

[QUIET, BUILDING SOUND OF WET WRIGGLING]

ARCHIVIST

No, I don't think so, it…

[WORM SOUND INTENSIFIES]

Sasha, run. RU–

[CLICK]

MAG039 – Infestation

Statement #0160729–A

[CLICK]

[WRITHING WORM SOUNDS]

SASHA

What are you doing?!

ARCHIVIST

Almost…

SASHA

Leave it, it's not –

ARCHIVIST

I got it!

[PULLS SOMETHING FROM THE MORASS]

MARTIN

Guys? Is everyth– OH CHRIST!

ARCHIVIST

Shut up and get the extinguishers!

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

The CO2! Get the goddamn CO2!

MARTIN

Right, right, right, right, right, right, right, right, yep.

ARCHIVIST

NOW!

[WRITHING CONTINUES AS EXTINGUISHER SPRAYS]

MARTIN

There's too many…

SASHA

Just keep spraying!

ARCHIVIST

We need to go!

SASHA

Where?

ARCHIVIST

Uh… Uh…

SASHA

Damn!

ARCHIVIST

I just… uh… let, let me think!

SASHA

Do you see Prentiss? If we could get her –

MARTIN

I, I, I don’t see her! I don’t see her! I don’t see her! I don’t see her!

ARCHIVIST

Uhhh…

SASHA

John?

John!?

MARTIN

This way!

Come on! Come this way! This way, this way!

[RUNNING, PURSUED BY WORMS]

ARCHIVIST

Erm…

LOOK OUT!

[CRASH]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[SOUND CUTS IN MIDWAY THROUGH THE ARCHIVIST SCREAMING]

MARTIN

And… there we go. Recording again.

Did you get it?

[PAINED CRY FROM ARCHIVIST AS SASHA EXTRACTS WORM

WITH A SQUELCH]

SASHA

There. And I just want to point out that I didn't make this much of a fuss.

ARCHIVIST

[Breathing heavily, aggrieved tone] I think your removal was substantially cleaner.

SASHA

I'm still not sure why you have this. Drinking in the archives?

MARTIN

What? No, no, it's for worms.

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

For pulling the worms out of people. Like now.

SASHA

You, er… what?

MARTIN

I used to carry around a knife, but I started thinking that, well, cutting into someone laterally wasn't really the most efficient way to get them out, and besides which, they seem to be quite slow burrowing in a straight line so, given their size, th-the corkscrew just seemed to be the better option.

…

Look, you guys got to go home every day, okay. I didn't! I've been thinking for a long time about what to do when… well, y'know, *this* happens.

ARCHIVIST

[Softly] Well… thank you.

SASHA

That's why we're here?

MARTIN

Yeah. The room's sealed, I checked it myself when I moved in.

ARCHIVIST

Climate controlled, as well. Strong door. Soundproof. *[Sigh]* These old files are far better protected than we ever were. Alright, I'll grant you it's a good place to lay low, but –

SASHA

They could still come in through the air con.

ARCHIVIST

Not easily. And… not en masse. It is actually safe.

MARTIN

Ha!

ARCHIVIST

Except, of course, that we're trapped.

MARTIN

Ah… yeah.

Sorry.

…

SASHA

Why record it?

ARCHIVIST

What?

SASHA

Before, in the office. It, it was stupid going for the tape recorder like that, and then when you dropped it out there –

ARCHIVIST

I said I was sorry. If I'd known Martin had another one stashed in here, I never would have…

SASHA

No, it's, it's fine, just… I just don't understand. I thought you hated the damn thing. You're always going on about it.

ARCHIVIST

I do! I did. I just… I don't want to become a mystery. I refuse to become another goddamn mystery.

SASHA

What?

ARCHIVIST

Look, even if you ignore the walking soil-sack out there, and the fact that we are probably minutes from death, there is still *so* much more happening here.

MARTIN

I'm not sure we can really ignore the –

ARCHIVIST

Every *real* statement just leads… deeper into something I don't even know the shape of yet. And to top it all, I still don't know what

happened to Gertrude. Officially she's still missing, but Elias is no help and the police were pretty clear that the wait to call her dead is just a formality. If I die, wormfood or… something else, whatever, I'm going to make damn sure the same doesn't happen to me. Whoever takes over from me is going to know *exactly* what happened.

SASHA

You don't think that would… put them off?

ARCHIVIST

[Bitter laugh] I hope so. Only an idiot would stay in this job.

MARTIN

[Chuckles] Wouldn't that make you an idiot?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, Martin, that was my point.

…

SASHA

Can you see what's going on out there?

MARTIN

Ish. When did we last clean these doors?

ARCHIVIST

What can you see?

MARTIN

Worms seem to have backed off a bit. There's a few lurking in the corners. Ooh, ooh hey, there's the other tape recorder!

SASHA

Any sign of Prentiss?

MARTIN

No. No, it looks like they're… waiting, I think.

ARCHIVIST

For what?

MARTIN

I don't know. Tim, maybe?

SASHA

Oh god!

MARTIN

I think he was out at lunch.

SASHA

Quick, someone call him. Tell him not to come back inside.

ARCHIVIST

There's no signal in here. We just have to hope he heard the noise.

…

SASHA

John, what did you mean by "real statements"?

ARCHIVIST

You know what I mean. The ones that have weird wrinkles, or that just seem to have something solid to them. They all have one thing in common.

SASHA

They don't record digitally.

ARCHIVIST

And we have to use the tape recorder. At this stage, if it records to my laptop I almost don't bother. I don't –

MARTIN

There! There, there, there! I see him!

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

Tim. Tim's outside.

SASHA

Oh god, he doesn't know. He doesn't see them.

[SASHA AND MARTIN BOTH START CALLING OUT TO TIM]

TIM, LOOK OUT!

ARCHIVIST

It's soundproofed. He can't hear you!

SASHA

What is he doing? No, Tim, just run! Leave it alone!

MARTIN

Oh no, no, no, no…

SASHA

Turn around. Just turn around.

MARTIN

Oh god. There she is, there she is.

ARCHIVIST

[Muttering] There's nothing we can do.

SASHA

Ah, screw this.

ARCHIVIST

What, Sasha, NO!

[DOOR OPENS]

SASHA

Tim, look out!

ARCHIVIST

Watch out for the tape –

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

TIM

…still working? Ah, okay. Test, test. What are you doing on the floor? Huh. *[Imitates Archivist voice]* Statement of Joe Spooky, regarding sinister happenings in the downtown old –

[DOOR OPENS]

SASHA

Tim, look out!

[WORM SOUND INTENSIFIES]

TIM

Sasha?

SASHA

Behind you! Run!

TIM

Oh…

PRENTISS

[Slowly intoning over worm sound] Do you hear their song?

SASHA

TIM!

[IMPACT, WORMS AND SCUFFLING]

[SASHA BREATHING HEAVILY AS SHE STUMBLES THROUGH DOORS]

SASHA

Damn it!

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Right. There we go. Martin, what do you see?

MARTIN

Hm? What?

ARCHIVIST

I can't really stand up yet. I need you to describe what's going on. For the record.

MARTIN

Ah, yeah. Sure. So, um, Sasha tackled Tim and there was kind of a struggle, but she made it out of the Archives. That, that was about two minutes ago and she's gone to get help. P-Probably. I mean, she, she couldn't… she wouldn't just run so…

ARCHIVIST

Did it look like any of the worms… got her before she left?

MARTIN

No. I don't think so. Tim neither, I think. It was hard to tell after she tackled him. There was just a lot of movement and, and shouting and, and wriggling…

ARCHIVIST

Stay with it, Martin. Tim. What happened to Tim?

MARTIN

They got split up and he ran into the office. You said that's where you made the hole. When you were recording. And they all came through, so… he's dead. He's dead in there and he's covered in worms and that's it.

ARCHIVIST

We don't know that.

MARTIN

…Maybe.

Maybe, maybe he found the spare CO2.

ARCHIVIST

Spare? What? Where? I never saw any.

MARTIN

Oh, I, er… I, I hid them in old casefile boxes.

ARCHIVIST

What, why?

MARTIN

Well, so the worms didn't know they were there!

Look, I know it's stupid.

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Yes it is. They're just… they're just unclassified parasites. They don't have consciousness, they can't plan, they're just an unthinking infection.

MARTIN

Seriously?!

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

Why do you *do* that?

ARCHIVIST

Do what?

MARTIN

Push the sceptic thing so hard!? I mean, it made sense at first, but now? After everything we've seen, after everything you've read! I hear you recording statements and y-you just dismiss them. You tear them to pieces like they're wasting your time, but half of the "rational" explanations you give are actually more far-fetched than just accepting it was a, a ghost or something. I mean for god's sake John, we're literally hiding from some kind of worm… queen… thing, how, how could you possibly still not believe!?

ARCHIVIST

Of course, I believe. Of course I do. Have you ever taken a look at the stuff we have in Artefact Storage? That's enough to convince anyone. But, but even before that… Why do you think I started working here? It's not exactly glamorous. I have… I've always believed in the supernatural. Within reason. I mean. I still think most of the statements down here aren't real. Of the hundreds I've recorded, we've had maybe… thirty, forty that are… that go on tape. Now, *those,* I believe, at least for the most part.

MARTIN

Then *why* do you –

ARCHIVIST

Because I'm scared, Martin!. Because when I record these

statements it feels… it feels like I'm being watched. I… I lose myself a bit. And then when I come back, it's like… like if I admit there may be any truth to it, whatever's watching will… know somehow. The scepticism, feigning ignorance. It just felt safer.

MARTIN

Well… It wasn't.

ARCHIVIST

No. No, it wasn't.

Still, it's not *my* fault we're going to be eaten by worms. Speaking of, can you see anything?

MARTIN

Not much. They're just… there.

ARCHIVIST

How many?

MARTIN

Too many. And more keep coming up through the floor. I didn't think they could get through.

ARCHIVIST

Prentiss?

MARTIN

No, I can't s… Oh, there she is.

ARCHIVIST

What's she doing?

MARTIN

I don't know. She's messing with the boxes. She's holding one up and… ahh!

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

She's… She's destroying them. Sort of.

ARCHIVIST

Sort of?

MARTIN

Well, I don't really know what that stuff coming out of her mouth is, but I think we should probably burn them.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

Right.

…

Why are you here Martin?

MARTIN

Well, well, Prentiss is out there and you can't run so –

ARCHIVIST

I mean at the Archive in general. Why haven't you quit?

MARTIN

Are you giving me my review now?

ARCHIVIST

No… We're clearly doing a whole heart-to-heart thing and, truth be told, the question's been bothering me. You've been living in the Archives for four months, constant threat of… this. Sleeping with a fire extinguisher and a corkscrew. Even you must be aware that that's not normal for an archiving job? Why are you still here?

MARTIN

[Considering] Don't really know. I just am. It didn't feel right to just leave. I've typed up a few resignation letters, but I just couldn't bring myself to hand them in.

I'm trapped here. It's like I can't… move on and the more I struggle,

the more I'm stuck.

ARCHIVIST

Martin…You're not, uh… You didn't die here, did you?

MARTIN

What? What? N-No… what?!

ARCHIVIST

No, I just… No, just the way you phrased that…

MARTIN

Made you think I was a *ghost?*

ARCHIVIST

No… it's –

MARTIN

No, no… it's just that whatever web these statements have caught you in, well, I'm there too. We all are, I think. *[Sigh]*

…

A ghost? Really?

ARCHIVIST

[Tiredly] Shut up, Martin.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[FIRE ALARM IS SOUNDING]

ELIAS

Right, tell me again, please.

SASHA

You're kidding.

ELIAS

You did bring a tape recorder. I just thought John would appreciate as many supplementary recordings as possible. For the record.

SASHA

Well, for the record, if we don't do something now, it won't matter either way.

ELIAS

So… these are the worms he and Martin have been going on about?

SASHA

The ones terrorising us for months? Yeah!

ELIAS

To be honest I always thought they were just… overreacting. Other staff have seen them around, but no-one's reported any aggressive behaviour or anything like that. You know how those two are… John puts on a good show, but sometimes I swear he's worse than Martin.

SASHA

Look, Elias. I don't know what you think is going on, but I have just seen thousands of… fleshworms pouring out of the wall! God knows how long they've been hiding! Tim might be dead, and the others…

ELIAS

Of course. The fire alarm was a good move, but it does mean most staff have evacuated, so we'll have to deal with them ourselves.

SASHA

There are thousands of them, Elias.

ELIAS

Not quite what I meant. On John's insistence I recently changed the Archive's fire suppression system to use carbon dioxide. Should have done it years ago, really –

SASHA

So why hasn't it gone off?

ELIAS

Because there isn't an actual fire.

SASHA

Right, right. Can we set it off manually? I think John's got a lighter somewhere.

ELIAS

He's not smoking again, is he? Anyway, it shouldn't be necessary. There is a manual release, a few floors down.

SASHA

Wait. Wait. Will it hurt Martin or John?

ELIAS

Almost certainly. Er, I'm not a doctor, but I know dumping a lot of CO2 on people isn't generally considered a good idea. I really don't want to have to find another Archivist so quickly after Gertrude, but from what you say… it might be a mercy. You know the situation best, so…?

SASHA

Let's go.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[FIRE ALARM CAN BE HEARD… AS CAN SOUND OF BANGING ON WALL]

MARTIN

I thought that wall was meant to be solid?!

ARCHIVIST

So did I. We don't have any sort of weapon, do we?

MARTIN

I mean… I mean, I suppose we could use –

ARCHIVIST

Don't say the corkscrew!

MARTIN

Okay.

ARCHIVIST

How many of them are outside of the door?

MARTIN

I don't know. I can't see because the window is covered in worms.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Right. Damn. Well, Martin I guess this is –

[SOUND OF PLASTERBOARD AND TILE BREAKING]

TIM

Hi guys!

MARTIN

Tim!

ARCHIVIST

Tim?! What the hell? I thought… how did you…?

MARTIN

You made it!

TIM

Funny story really. I ran into the office, worms everywhere, horrible death and everything, tripped and fell in some boxes and there were like 20 cans of gas in there.

MARTIN

Are, are you alright? You seem a bit…

TIM

Fine! Fine! Gas… bit light-headed. Not a lot of ventilation in the tunnels. Come on!

ARCHIVIST

In-Into the tunnels?

TIM

Yeah! Actually, not that many worms in there anymore. I think they've mostly gone into the Archive. Although the ones down here are faster for some reason. And quieter.

ARCHIVIST

You're not bitten, are you?

TIM

No, I don't think so! Have a look!

ARCHIVIST

Yes, alright Tim, you look fine. Put them back on, please.

MARTIN

Can you walk, John?

ARCHIVIST

No, I can limp.

TIM

Then let's go!

ARCHIVIST

Martin, could you pass me the tape recorder?

MARTIN

Sure. I think it's running out, though.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. I suppose I can turn it back on when we're being eaten alive.

TIM

Why *do* you have a second tape recorder, Martin?

MARTIN

Oh, um… well, I've been using it to record myself. I write poetry and I think the tapes have a sort of… low-fi charm.

ARCHIVIST

…

I see.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

SASHA

[SPEECH IS ECHOED FROM THE ROOM AS SHE WALKS]

[With some despondency in tone] Okay, John. I know you'll want to know what's been happening. If you're still alive after this. The worms are on the upper floor. Not as many as down in the Archive, but enough.

I set the fire alarm off, so everyone's evacuated except me and Elias. I didn't see any signs of the fire brigade, but I haven't been near a window in a while. There was a… I guess you'd call it a… a wave of worms. I got cut off from Elias. I hope he made it to the fire system, but who knows. Maybe everyone's dead already.

I've had to retreat into Artefact Storage. That should tell you something about how bad it is out there.

God, I hate this place.

Did I ever tell you I first joined the Institute as a practical researcher? I had to analyse and investigate all the stuff in here. Take notes after sleeping in the rusted chair, write in the memory book, all that sort of thing. I transferred after three months. Would've quit, but couldn't afford to back then.

Never understood why they keep this stuff secret. I mean, we've, we've enough here to send any sceptic packing, but it's just locked

away. I… I asked Elias about it once, but he just muttered something about funding and mission statements. He's good at changing the subject, isn't he?

Sorry. I'm rambling. No worms, though, so that's good.

Oh, hey. I've found… I've found that table you were talking about. Don't really see what all the fuss is about. Just a… basic… optical illusion. Nothing special… just… just a… wait…

[Hushed and panicked] John! John, I think there's someone here. Hello? I see you. Show yourself.

[DISTORTION INTENSIFIES]

[SASHA SCREAMS, TAPE RECORDER DROPS]

[DISTORTION FADES TO A CRACKLE]

NOT!SASHA

[Words warped] Hello?

I see you.

[FOOTSTEPS]

[Clearly] I see you.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[WATER DRIPS]

ARCHIVIST

Update. I don't know how long we've been down here. These tunnels are a maze, and we don't know where we are. We have four of the –

TIM

Martin's gone.

ARCHIVIST

I'm getting to that. Martin has disappeared. Tim was right about there being fewer worms down here, but they are much faster. More aggressive. None of us have been hit yet but… during one of the more alarming encounters, Martin ran off.

TIM

He thought we were behind him, I think.

ARCHIVIST

He didn't think at all. Tim was with me, and my leg slowed me down. He must have taken a turn we didn't see or something. We lost him. But, Tim has managed to find what looks to be an actual

trapdoor, so… we won't need to bludgeon our way through any more drywall. I'm recording this in case –

TIM

In case the trapdoor opens back into the Archives and Prentiss is there to kill us.

ARCHIVIST

In as many words, yes. Tim?

TIM

Alright.

[TRAPDOOR IS PUSHED OPEN TO SOUND OF FIRE ALARM AND LOTS OF WRITHING]

PRENTISS

Archivist.

TIM

Ah.

ARCHIVIST

Shit.

[CLICK]

MAG040 – Human Remains

Statement #0160729–B

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

[Weary] Statement of, uh…

ELIAS

John… as your boss, I'm telling you to go home.

ARCHIVIST

I'm fine.

ELIAS

Look. You look like a mummy. You need rest.

ARCHIVIST

Our friends in the hazmat suits gave me a clean bill of health, bloody holes notwithstanding. And they seemed quite keen to quarantine anyone showing even the slightest sign of infection. It's just pain.

ELIAS

The paramedics said your lungs need fresh air. Tim's as well.

ARCHIVIST

It's fresh enough down here.

ELIAS

A basement filled with a thousand rotting worm carcasses? Surely we could do this in my office?

ARCHIVIST

No. I need to be here. Keep watch. I need to be sure…

ELIAS

John! She's gone. I went with the ECDC people when they took her away. I watched her body burn. Jane Prentiss is dead. You can relax.

ARCHIVIST

You know why I can't. When Martin found…

ELIAS

That's a matter for the police.

ARCHIVIST

Fine! Fine. I'll go home as soon as I have everyone's statements.

ELIAS

Very well.

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Elias Bouchard, Head of the Magnus Institute, regarding the… infestation by the entity formerly known as Jane Prentiss. Statement recorded direct from subject, 29th July, 2016. Whenever you're ready.

ELIAS

There isn't a lot to tell for my part. This afternoon, just after lunch, I was going over some budgets in my office, as I normally do on a Tuesday, when the fire alarm started going off. It was annoying, but not too worrying at first. I packed my work away, and began to calmly head towards the evacuation point, when Sasha came barrelling through the door, babbling about worms, and clutching a tape recorder.

I told her that whatever was wrong should wait until we were out of the building, as there may be a fire. She told me *she* had set off the fire alarm to get everyone out, and that you and Martin and Tim were currently trapped by Jane Prentiss.

Obviously this got my attention, and I suggested she turn the tape recorder on, largely so this sort of debrief wouldn't be necessary. Did you not get the tape?

ARCHIVIST

No. There was… some sort of problem. Sasha tells me the tape was

lost.

ELIAS

Hmm. Well, I explained to her about the recently installed fire suppression system, and said that, as there was no actual fire, we'd need to activate it manually. We hurried down, and it was clear everyone else had already evacuated. We… had reached the ground floor when… well…

I… know I have often seemed dismissive of your concerns before, and in fact I was getting ready to raise the issue of Martin's continuing to live in the Institute's basement, especially as I believe he's been stealing fire extinguishers. But… honestly, I didn't fully appreciate what you'd been talking about until I turned that corner and we saw what I can only describe as a… a tidal wave of filth rushing towards us. I feel somewhat ashamed to admit I didn't really pay any attention to Sasha as I ran, and must have lost her at some point. We became separated.

I composed myself, and decided on a more roundabout route to the boiler room. Luckily, it seemed the things were mainly concentrated in that one mass, leaving the other corridors largely vacant. It took me ten minutes, maybe fifteen, but I made it with only one close call. The sight of rows and rows of huge, red CO2 canisters was certainly something of a comfort. I do apologise that it took me quite so long to figure out how to actually work the system. If I'd been quicker…

ARCHIVIST

It's fine.

We're alive.

ELIAS

Yes. Well. I turned on the fire suppression system. And… that's when I heard the scream. I can't really describe it but… well, I'm sure I don't need to, you were a lot closer to it than I was.

ARCHIVIST

It's the last thing I remember before blacking out. Tens of thousands of… things without mouths screaming as one.

ELIAS

…

Yes. Horrible sound. Anyway, I called the fire department, ambulance and a contact at the ECDC who had previously been involved in the Prentiss investigation. Once I was sure most of the gas would have dissipated, I headed down to the Archives to see what had happened. Sasha was already there, but you and Tim were in bad shape. It looked like a few dozen worms had been going into each of you when the carbon dioxide killed them. Was like bloody Swiss che–

ARCHIVIST

Yes… thank you. I remember everything from when the ambulance arrived. Quarantine, bandaging, et cetera. When did Martin get back?

ELIAS

It was about an hour after they'd taken you and Tim away. They were prepping Prentiss' corpse for disposal, when Martin burst out of that trapdoor you found, screaming that he'd found a body. So we called the police.

ARCHIVIST

Tell me what happened to Gertrude Robinson.

ELIAS

John, how many times do we need to go over this?

ARCHIVIST

We've never got it on tape.

ELIAS

You can barely stand. Just… why don't we just do this tomorrow?

…

Fine.

On the 15th of March last year, I had a query about a statement one of our researchers was after and went down to the Archives.

Gertrude wasn't there, but her desk was covered in blood. I called the police, and there was a huge search, but there was no sign was found of Gertrude, alive or dead. She didn't have any assistants, so there were no witnesses, and no-one saw or heard anything.

The police tested the blood and confirmed the DNA matched to Gertrude, though I don't know why they had her on file. They judged there to be almost a gallon of blood spilled, far more than the human body can lose and survive, so I assumed she was dead and left the investigation to the police, for all that good it did me. And I appointed another archivist.

Martin finding her body in the tunnels is as much a mystery to me as it is to you.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Right. Thank you, Elias. Statement ends.

Can you send in Tim?

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

TIM

[Tired] Do you need much? I'd really like to go home.

ARCHIVIST

I sympathise. It won't take more than a few minutes. I just… I need the parts that weren't on tape at the time.

TIM

Sure. Just… quarantine, y'know? Not as much fun as it sounds.

ARCHIVIST

You were certainly in there longer than I was.

Everything alright?

TIM

Yeah, I just made some joke about itching and suddenly they were doing a whole bunch more tests.

ARCHIVIST

Well, itching is one of –

TIM

I know! I know. I was trying to lighten the mood.

I'm fine, though. Except for the holes. And the pain. And the blood and the nightmares. Could've been worse though, eh? Another couple of minutes and –

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Yes. It was…

Anyway, statement of Timothy Stoker, archival assistant at the Magnus Institute, regarding the infestation by the entity formerly known as Jane Prentiss. Statement recorded direct from subject, 29th July 2016. Just take it from when you got back from lunch.

TIM

Well, I could tell something was wrong as soon as I got back. It was quiet. I mean, it's normally quiet, but it was dead quiet. I spotted the tape recorder lying on the ground, and went over to, er, see if it was damaged, and as I was checking it I heard Sasha shouting. It's a bit of blur, to be honest, 'cause when I turned around, there she was. Prentiss. Her face so full of holes it's like, "my eyes are up here", but they're not, you know? They're just… She tried to say something, but I don't know, I couldn't really understand her through all the…

So, I could see the worms were coming through the floor, the walls, everywhere. The whole "we're safe inside the Archive" thing" Not so much. I don't know what I was going to do, I think I was going to try and hit her, but that's when Sasha knocked me to the floor. It, it was a good move, actually. Prentiss didn't seem to expect it, and we crushed a lot of worms when we fell. They were slow to react, and we were running before they really went for us. I mean, all this happened in the space of a few seconds, so I'm not exactly certain.

Sasha had to basically drag me behind her. I saw the shelf in front

of us was about to topple. There were so many worms on it so, being the hero I am, I let go of her hand and told her to get help. She made it out the main door. I turned to run into the office. I was just trying to get a door between me and Prentiss. I didn't know that's where you made the first hole.

There were loads of them. Some jumped at me as I ran inside so I dodged out the way, but ended up sprawling into this pile of boxes that I thought were case files. Instead, I found myself lying on top of a whole bunch of CO2 canisters, which are damn hard by the way. The worms were still coming, so I used them. I mean, I went full Gas-Rambo.

After that… my memory gets a bit fuzzy. I think the paramedic called it 'respiratory acidosis'… from breathing in all the carbon dioxide, rather than your more traditional oxygen. I remember finishing the first few extinguishers killing the things, but they kept coming, so I grabbed a few more, and saw the massive hole in the wall. There didn't seem much point staying, so I went into the tunnels. They were cold, dry. You know that worm smell? That earthy rotten smell?

ARCHIVIST

Oh yes.

TIM

Well, yeah. There weren't so many down there. I think they were almost all in the Archives. I have a theory, actually. I think they

weren't ready to attack when you found the tunnels. It's like, something in the Institute slows them down, and makes them, um, heh, sluggish.

And that noise they make? That squirming sound? They don't make it when they're in the tunnels. I don't know why. It was only when they came into the Institute. Maybe the light, or the aircon, or something? I'm not sure, but I think it made them weaker, and they've been down there for months, breeding, building up their numbers until there were enough to properly bury us. Except you found that hidden passage, and they had to act.

ARCHIVIST

Maybe. Could you… describe the tunnels?

TIM

You were there.

ARCHIVIST

Humour me.

TIM

I remember they sloped down and up and around. I couldn't keep track of where I was. I did see some more worms, though. They were fast. I only saw a couple, but it was still proper jumpscare territory. I got them, though. It was really surreal. I only had my phone's torch, and it was hard to keep an eye out, I was so light

headed.

I wandered for, I don't know, maybe ten minutes before I found a wall that seemed different. It looked like someone had just put some plasterboard over an entrance, and I could hear you and Martin on the other side. I broke through and, well, you were there for the rest.

ARCHIVIST

Quite. You… you weren't there when Martin found the body, though, were you?

TIM

No. I was quarantined, same as you.

ARCHIVIST

And you didn't see it in the tunnels when you were first exploring?

TIM

No. I did see… uh, I mean, maybe…

ARCHIVIST

What?

TIM

No, it's just… I think I was still gassed, and it was dark, but… I found a room.

ARCHIVIST

Go on.

TIM

I didn't stay long, 'cause it had a lot of worms in, and they weren't acting like the others. They were sort of… wrapping around each other, like they were trying to form a… thing, like a structure or something. A ring.

I was probably still out of my skull, and half-hallucinated the whole thing, but it looked like they were trying to make a doorway.

ARCHIVIST

A doorway? Is it still there?

TIM

No. I pumped two full extinguishers into that room. Nothing was getting out.

ARCHIVIST

Good. Good. Go home, Tim. Get some sleep.

TIM

Heh. Yeah. Sure.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Sasha James, archival assistant at the Magnus Institute, regarding the invasion by the entity formerly known as Jane Prentiss. Statement recorded direct from subject, 29th July, 2016. In your own time.

NOT!SASHA

Yes… Where do you want me to begin? I was with you until I ran out to save Tim. Then we were separated, and I fled into the Institute proper. I pulled a fire alarm, because the worms were following me, and I didn't want anyone else to get hurt. I went to Elias. We talked. We were going to save you, but the worms came, and I fled into the Artefact Storage room. You know I hate the Artefact Storage room, so it must have been bad.

ARCHIVIST

You used to work there, didn't you?

NOT!SASHA

Yes, for three months. It was dreadful. I used to think that it was the most dangerous place in the Institute.

ARCHIVIST

Not anymore.

NOT!SASHA

Yes, not anymore. It was safe enough. The worms didn't get in, and I stayed there until the fire system deployed, then I ran out to get to a window. I saw the worms in the main Institute. They shrivelled and died. I don't think I'll ever forget that scream, though. I could hear Prentiss screaming even from there.

ARCHIVIST

Well, it's thanks to you, to be honest. If you hadn't met that 'Michael' thing…

NOT!SASHA

Yes, Michael… With the bones in his hands. We still don't know much about him, do we?

ARCHIVIST

No, not yet. Sorry, getting… distracted. You got as far as Jane Prentiss' death.

NOT!SASHA

Yes, I returned to the Archives, and all the worms were dead. You and Tim were lying there, but you weren't moving. You just lay there, the dead worms still half inside of you. The trapdoor was open next to you, and more were inside. I went over to check, and you were alive, so I pulled you back to where there was more air,

and began to remove the worms.

Are you alright?

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, just… difficult to hear, you know.

NOT!SASHA

Yes, I understand. That was when Elias arrived with the fire brigade and doctors and the hazmat people. They talked to me for a long time, and I did my best to explain the situation. They checked me for worm-marks, but I was fine. They took you away, so I waited with Elias. He was looking at me strangely, but we were both quiet. It had been a very strange day.

After an hour or so, we heard cries from the trapdoor. It was Martin. He was shouting about a body. We got him out, and Elias tried to get him to calm down and explain. He said he'd found the body of the previous Archivist, Gertrude Robinson, and that was when Elias called the police. I tried to calm him down, but he was in bad shape. The police arrived, and I gave them pretty much this same statement.

ARCHIVIST

Right… Right. What about the tape? You had the tape recorder, the one I'd just recorded Mr. Ramao's statement on, but when you gave it back, it was empty.

NOT!SASHA

Yes, I dropped it a few times. The eject button must have been hit. I didn't notice until you pointed it out. It's probably around somewhere. Is it that important?

ARCHIVIST

It's important to me. Are you feeling alright? You seem a bit out of it.

NOT!SASHA

Yes, I'm very tired. It's hard to keep track of things sometimes.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Go get some rest, Sasha.

NOT!SASHA

Yes. I will.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

MARTIN

[Tired] I mean, I already told the police.

ARCHIVIST

Well, now tell me. I need to hear it. I need to record it.

MARTIN

I… alright. Are you okay?

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Painkillers are starting to wear off, but… It's fine. Statement of Martin Blackwood, archival assistant, etcetera, etcetera. Go.

MARTIN

Right. Well, I was doing some background checks for case 0081709, when you and Sasha started screaming, so I went to ch–

ARCHIVIST

Yes, yes, I was there! I was with you for almost the whole time, and *that* tape survived just fine.

MARTIN

Sorry.

ARCHIVIST

Ah, it's fine. I just… I only need from when you got separated. From when you got lost in the tunnels.

MARTIN

No, I mean… I'm sorry I left you.

ARCHIVIST

…

Oh, Martin.

MARTIN

[Tearful] It was an accident. I thought you two were with me! I mean, the worms came at us, and they were so much faster, and then there was the gas, and the running, and I just… I, I thought you were right behind me. But when I turned round you were gone. You were both gone. It was an accident.

ARCHIVIST

I know. It's fine, Martin. Everybody's… *[sigh]* Everyone's fine… I just need you to tell me what happened next, and then it's finished.

MARTIN

Alright. So, um, yeah, we got separated so I, I tried shouting, but you didn't answer. The walls seemed to kill the sound dead and there wasn't any echo. They were old stone, like, really old, and there was no light except my torch. I, I always keep my torch on me, ever since I moved into the Archives, so I had that, at least.

I wandered for a while. It's a, it's a maze down there, John. I don't know how far the passages go. Maybe miles. I think it must be the old Millbank Prison, like Tim was saying before. I even found some

stairs at one point, but I really didn't want to go down them.

I hadn't seen any worms for a few minutes, and weirdly enough that actually started to worry me, like, if there weren't any worms then I'd gone too far from the Institute. And there was more dust in those corridors too, and dead rats, even some discarded wine bottles. At one point there was an empty packet of mint imperials –

ARCHIVIST

Martin…

MARTIN

Sorry. Yeah. Um. I was trying to go back, not that I knew what back even meant down there, when I heard the scream. I don't even know how to go about describing it, but I thought… well I hoped… Well, when I started to find the shrivelled bodies of worms all over the place, I knew she was dead.

So I wanted to get out of there. I was looking for a way up, but it felt more and more like I was trapped. Every turn just led me to another empty corridor. When I finally found a door, I thought it might actually get out, but instead…

It was a small room. Square. There was dust on everything. Cardboard boxes were piled around. They were full of old cassette tapes.

ARCHIVIST

That's where you found her?

MARTIN

Yes. She was sat in a wooden chair in the middle of the room. No worms. No cobwebs. Just… an old corpse. Gertrude Robinson. She was slumped forward, but I could see her mouth hanging open. So I ran, and I found the trapdoor soon afterwards.

ARCHIVIST

Could you find the room again?

MARTIN

I don't know. Maybe. The police certainly expect me to, although I got the feeling they're not too keen to explore the tunnels either.

ARCHIVIST

Martin, how did Gertrude Robinson die?

MARTIN

I don't know. Not for sure. It was so dark, and I only saw the body for a few seconds. The police were quite clear that the cause of death could be absolutely any–

ARCHIVIST

MARTIN! How did she die?

MARTIN

She was shot! Three times, that I could see. Three shots to the chest.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Right. Thank you Martin.

MARTIN

…

Sure.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Gertrude Robinson, the last Archivist at the Magnus Institute, and my predecessor, was murdered. There were no worms to infest her, no strange, ghostly apparitions to warp her mind, or caves to entomb her. She was killed, in the Archives, by someone who used a gun, and that scares me far more than any spectre or twisted creature. Because that means someone here is a killer.

The police will investigate thoroughly, I have no doubt, but… given their track record in this matter I am not optimistic.

There is something in these files, in these statements. I know that

now, some deeper mystery. I think Gertrude Robinson found it, and I think that is why they killed her.

Some of my tapes are missing. Maybe it was Prentiss, but she seemed more interested in the written files, and the other tapes seem fine. There's no sign of debris, or anything that would indicate they've been destroyed, but, in addition to the tape Sasha lost earlier, the tapes for cases 0051701 and 0160204 are gone. I don't know why these two specifically, but I cannot trust anyone.

I'm going to figure this out, and I'm not going to stop. They'll have to kill me first.

End recording.

[CLICK]

Season 1 has featured:

- Jonathan Sims as **The Archivist**
- Alexander J. Newall as **Martin Blackwood**
- Mike LeBeau as **Tim Stoker**
- Lottie Broomhall as **Sasha James**
- Ben Meredith as **Elias Bouchard**
- Lydia Nicholas as **Melanie King**

- **Martin Corcoran** as **Dr. Lionel Elliot / Breekon**
- **Steven Violich** as **Hope**
- **Katie Davison** as **Naomi Herne**
- Hannah Brankin as **Jane Prentiss / Laura Popham**
- Evelyn Hewitt as **Not!Sasha**

MAG040.1 – Season 2 Trailer

[SOUND OF PAPERS BEING SHUFFLED, DRAWERS BEING OPENED, GENERAL SEARCHING]

ARCHIVIST

[Distant] Martin?

[FAINT FOOTSTEPS, MORE SEARCHING]

[DOOR OPENS]

Martin, is that…?

[FOOTSTEPS]

Martin?

[DOOR OPENS]

MARTIN

Yes?

ARCHIVIST

[Startled] Ah! What? I thought… Is the trapdoor open?

MARTIN

No… It's been locked for weeks. Why?

ARCHIVIST

No reason, just seemed, uh…

Martin, you've left the recorder running again!

MARTIN

No, no I didn–

[CLICK]

MAG041 – Too Deep

Statement #0160902

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, regarding exploration of the tunnels recently discovered below the archive. Statement given direct, 2nd September, 2016. Statement, uh… Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I've been going into the tunnels. It's…. There are, uh… Jane Prentiss is dead. I **know** this. I have a small jar on my desk of what are supposed to be her ashes, though I don't believe it for a second. I think Martin just gave me a jar of dust to try and calm me down. Give me something to focus on for closure. I hate to say it, but it does appear to be working. A victory for the placebo effect, it would seem. But that's beside the point. The worms have been cleared and incinerated, the floors and walls repaired, and the archive looks remarkably like it was never attacked at all.

Unlike me. I've healed enough in the last month to return to work, but I'm told it's unlikely the scars will ever *truly* fade. Tim is still signed off. Truth be told, I could have stayed away longer, probably

should have, but I don't think the boredom was good for me. I tried to come back earlier, but Martin wouldn't hear of it. Almost threw me out of the archive. Is he hiding something? Heh. No, of course not. He's probably just legitimately concerned for my health.

Why do I still feel like I'm being watched? I'd just about convinced myself it was Prentiss, watching me in secret while she filled the walls with her writhing hordes, but no. She is dead and gone, and still whenever I talk into this… damn thing, I feel this… I'm being watched. I know I am. I'd think it was some aspect of the recorder itself, but it still happens even when I'm just reading these files. Not as strongly as when I'm… recording them, perhaps, but still there. Is it…

Huh. You know, I always despised those witnesses who rambled on, unable to stay on topic, couldn't give as concise a statement. Yet here I am, mumbling my vague suspicions of being watched, and completely ignoring the reason I'm making a statement of my own.

I have been exploring the tunnels.

It's been a couple of weeks now. From before I was officially back. If you listen to this, Martin, I am sorry. I've gone behind your back to explore the tunnels on… several occasions. I took the key from Elias' desk some time ago. I don't think he noticed. Since Martin stopped living in the Archives, I've had ample opportunities for exploration by night. Part of me still wonders if going down there after dark was more dangerous, but the pitch black of those tunnels would be no different in the daytime. The only light down there is

what you bring yourself.

The first time I attempted to explore them, I had no idea. I brought one torch and that was it. The lights in the archive were off when I arrived at the Institute. I hadn't been down here since it was full of worm carcasses. I'd never explored down here by torchlight, and the shadows were… starker than I had anticipated. Every time I walked between the shelves, I swear I would see movement out the corner of my eye. But when I turned, there was nothing. *Obviously* there was nothing. Then I came to the trapdoor.

If Sasha hadn't thought to clearly mark it with hazard tape, I'm not sure I would ever have found it again, but there it was. It took several minutes of fumbling before I was able to figure out how to lift the concealed handle and expose the lock, but I managed it. The key turned with a click that I found oddly satisfying, and I pulled it open. When I had thought about that moment before, I had always imagined it groaning open with a tortured, ominous creak, but it was almost silent. It glided open as though on freshly oiled hinges, with only the faintest puff of stagnant air being released from beneath it.

The opening was utterly black, with the faintest hint of decay in the cold, clammy air that rushed out of it. The stairs down it were steep, far steeper than I remembered them from when I had first climbed out, but those memories are… unreliable, and tinged with other, more potent, experiences. I turned the torch on, and was pleased by how easily it penetrated the darkness, illuminating the rough, grey stone below. I was expecting my torch to be met by

hundreds of decaying worm husks, but the passage seemed to be empty. I headed down into the tunnel, closing the trapdoor behind me.

It is hard to put into words how it felt to be down there, in the cool, mouldering air of the tunnels. Have you ever left a crowded room, and literally felt the silence as you walked out into the night? It was something like that, a sudden, quiet absence. Not in itself a fearful thing, but unsettling in a way I hadn't noticed through the fear and adrenaline of my first time in the tunnels. I took a moment to examine the feeling, but couldn't trace it anything obvious, so I began to explore.

It was almost unreal how quickly I became lost. I generally consider myself to have an excellent sense of direction, but within minutes I became unsure of exactly which passages I had come from. I didn't even have the excuse of the corridors all looking the same, as they varied significantly in height and construction. Some were built of sturdy brick, some seemed almost as though they had formed naturally, though in all cases it was the same dull, grey stone.

To call it a maze wouldn't quite be accurate, as a maze is *designed.* It is set out with an obvious goal, even if that goal is to confuse and disorientate. This place, it felt more organic in its unpredictability, as though it had been intended to be used, to be travelled, but had gotten twisted somehow.

I found spaces that seemed intended as rooms, but without doors. Elsewhere, there were doors that seemed simply attached to the

walls. Most of these were firmly shut, though some opened to reveal the flat grey stone behind. Only a handful I opened had actual rooms behind them, and in every case, I found myself wondering whether **that** was where Martin had found her.

There was no way to tell. Even when the police finally found Gertrude's body, they took it, chair and all, as well as all the tapes. Evidence, they said, and they might be right, though I don't envy them the task of going through all of them. There must have been hundreds.

No. I suppose in some way I do envy them. They are an insight into my predecessor's time here; something I desperately want to know more about. Whatever's on them, it must be important, because… either she chose to hide them down here, or whoever killed her did. Either way, I have a feeling it isn't something the police are going to understand. I half-hoped to stumble across a lone cassette lying in one of the corridors, dropped or overlooked, but there was nothing. Just dark and empty tunnels, silent and unwelcoming.

I foolishly didn't think to make a note of the time I entered the tunnels, so it was hard to say how long I had been down there, or how far I had gone, when I found the first of the worms, but it can't have been more than a half hour. They were long dead by then. Shrivelled, stringy things, like discarded sausage casing, and it was odd to see how clear a line there was between the wormless tunnels and those where they still lay rotting. A clear line beyond which the cleaning crews had decided not to advance. When I crossed that line, I half-expected the corpses to spring to life, turning their

squirming heads towards me with a predatory lunge, but they were still.

Nonetheless, I went slower through those deeper passages, picking my footing carefully so as not to touch them. The air was colder here, suffused with the faint tang of rot, and I began to wonder how much battery I had in my torch. I had put a fresh one in before my expedition, I'm not stupid, but the more I thought about it, the more I realised that I don't actually know how long batteries last for continuous use in a heavy-duty torch.

I hadn't even been down there an hour, but already it felt like the light it cast was weaker, somehow, and I realised how unsure I was of my exact route back. I decided I would rather cut my first trip unnecessarily short than risk being trapped down there without light. So I turned back.

It was almost impossible to retrace my steps. I tried to remember my route using what vague oddities I could remember as landmarks: a burned door, a particularly warped corridor. But trying to find them again was useless in the winding passages. In my increasing panic to find the way out, I almost forgot the things I had originally gone down there to look for. Then I found the circle of worms.

When Tim had first described it, I had only half-believed him. I'm sorry, Tim, if you're listening, but the CO2 had done some strange things to you at that point. He had the right of it, though. By the time I found it, there was little left but a thick carpet of dead

worms, but a few were still embedded in the wall providing the clear outline of a circle. The ceiling was higher here, and all told it must have been about… ten feet in diameter.

Its size was not the most disconcerting thing, though. Inside the circle, the stone was… *wrong* somehow. Solid, but oddly wavy, like chocolate that's melted and then rehardened. It took me a minute or two to work up the courage to wade through that shallow sea of filth, but I did, and when I touched the warped wall, it felt soft and porous. But stable. I turned and left, but not before noting that another path also appeared to have been pushed through the worms on the floor, though when it had happened or who had made it I couldn't say.

It took me almost another hour to find the trapdoor again. My torch showed no signs of giving up, but I was still on the verge of panic. My hands were so slick with sweat that I fumbled several times with the handle before finally pushing it open bodily, and falling through onto the floor of the Archives. It was about three in the morning by that time. I had managed to reopen a few of my partially healed wounds, so I headed home to rest.

It turned out the trip had taken far more out of me than I thought; it was almost a week before I felt like I might be up for another excursion. This time, however, I decided that I was not going to take any chances: I packed three torches, with enough replacement batteries to last for days, food and water, in case I was down there longer than expected, a box of white chalk to clearly mark my way, and the largest knife I was able to buy at short notice.

The first time down there I had, on more than one occasion, been almost certain that I could hear sounds of movement from further into the tunnels. At the time I had convinced myself it was simply a combination of echo and my mind playing on my fears, but on the chance there was something down there…

Well, I had my doubts how effective a knife would be, but it certainly eased my mind. Beyond that, I made sure to take one of the smaller CO2 fire extinguishers from the Archives. I was determined that any surviving worms would not be so for long.

Again, I waited until nightfall before letting myself into the Archives, and heading down into the tunnels below. Almost as soon as I got down there I started marking the walls and intersections with white, chalk arrows. They pointed the direction I had come from, the direction I'd need to follow when I wanted to leave. If there was anything down here and I had to flee, then I reasoned all I would need to do was follow the chalk arrows back to the entrance.

For a while this worked. Once or twice I discovered I had inadvertently made a loop or gotten turned around and was facing one of my earlier arrows, but it was a relatively simple matter to correct it. I also set up my watch so I had a clear idea of how long I had been down there. After a half hour I had gotten far deeper than I had in my entire first expedition, and gotten past the empty area, into the tunnels still lined with dead worms, and then beyond them, to those tunnels wholly empty and, apparently, undisturbed since the days of Millbank Prison.

I had done what research I could on Millbank. First proposed and designed in 1799 by Jeremy Bentham, a philosopher who wished to test his theories of the panopticon prison, where cells would be arranged in a circle around a single, central, guard tower, so all cells were observable at once. It was to have six such areas, arranged in hexagons, giving it from the air the shape of a vast, angular flower.

It's not clear why that original plan was abandoned, but from 1812 onwards, a succession of other architects were brought in to try and finish the project. Finally, three years later, they brought in Robert Smirke. He saw the project to completion in 1821, with a design remarkably similar to Bentham's original. However, whereas Bentham's would have been geometric, and easy to navigate, Millbank Penitentiary as it was built was more often described as an eccentric maze: twisting corridors, doors at strange angles, and narrow passages so poorly lit inmates would need to feel their way along.

Throughout much of the 19th century, it was where prisoners were kept before transportation to Australia, and the brutality of the jailors was said to be second to none. Its position on what was then marshlands hardly helped, with sickness and disease rife within their walls.

It was a huge complex, covering much of what we now call Chelsea, but when it was finally closed in 1890, it was demolished. Flattened. Which meant that what I was in now couldn't be the old prison itself. It had to be something built below it. And it was this

that gave me such pause when I found the first set of steps leading even further down.

They were stone, spiralling into the darkness at an angle so steep it made my legs weaken slightly. The steps led higher as well, but after a few metres disappeared into the solid stone of the ceiling. I made a note of their location and carried on, keen to explore as much of the first level as possible before going any deeper.

It was becoming very apparent that these tunnels must have covered the entire area of Millbank, or even further, and there was every possibility they continued for miles. I had seen little down there of note thus far, something I will admit gave me a pang of both disappointment and relief, and took a short break to drink some water and compose myself.

It was shortly after this I found the next staircase. It was identical to the first in material, in construction and look. It was the same in all but one detail: the large chalk arrow pointing downwards. I'm sure I don't need to say that I had not drawn it. My own arrows were jagged, workmanlike things. This was curled and neat, pointing the way with a flourish.

That was when I heard the noises again. They could have been footsteps, I suppose, but if so they were soft, quiet. Was someone running around those tunnels barefoot? I froze in place and listened, but the noises did not return, and I gripped my knife.

I am not a brave man. I believe I am starting to come to terms with

that fact, but I am, in certain circumstances, a very stubborn one. And there was something inside me that made the decision that I would rather die at the hands of some tunnel-dwelling beast than work above without knowing what it was. Maybe I'd be lucky, and find a crazed gun-wielding madman, a convenient killer for Gertrude.

I can almost hear my assistants chiding me for not turning tail and running then and there, but it's hard to fully explain the borderline mania that gripped me when I saw that arrow. Mocking and inviting all at one. I was not so foolish as to run down the stairs, but I descended them quicker than was safe. Down and down and down they went, each rotation revealing more tunnels and doors, but I saw no sign of reaching the bottom. I had gone down about four levels when my torch caught what I thought was movement in the corridors beyond.

I left the stairs in pursuit, but was unable to find any sign of life. Or death, I suppose. Only an empty wine bottle, the label all but rotted away, but the year was still legible as 2003. The passages here were more pronounced in their difference than the ones further up, some being so irregular and seamless as to almost seem organic, while others were almost unnervingly square and regular, with sharp angles and precisely laid bricks.

It was in one of these that it happened. I had continued to mark my route with chalk, and was scratching an arrow into a particularly flat wall, when I looked up to see the turning ahead of me was no longer there. Instead, there was simply a dead end. I could find no

sign that there had been any movement, nor had I heard anything.

I turned back, and immediately noticed that the wall opposite me was closer than it had been before. I took a step back in shock, and my feet hit the wall behind me. The passage was getting narrower, though I could not see any movement. I stood completely still and for several seconds there was silence. Then, from somewhere in the darkness, I heard a single word, clear as day: “Leave.”

It was spoken simply, without intonation or threat. Just a command.

So I did. I began to shuffle back as quickly as possible the way I had come, keeping my eyes open as long as I could, as every time I closed them the wall seemed to get even closer. By the time I reached the stairs back up, it had almost pinned me. I fled back up the stairs, followed the arrows I had left back to the trapdoor. It took me barely ten minutes, but I was moving faster than I would have thought possible in those… cramped tunnels. I locked the trapdoor behind me, and placed the heaviest objects I could find on it.

I have not been below the Institute since then. It took no small amount of consideration to decide I should officially make a statement. I did not think to bring the tape recorder with me. I suppose I’ve gotten out of the habit during my recuperation.

I am no closer to determining what is lurking down there than I was when I started. If anything I have more questions. Why point me

downwards, only to then demand I run back? Was it some sort of trap? A test? I don't know, but right now, finding whatever secrets might be lurking in those tunnels is my primary concern.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

I don't care about the tunnels, or the secrets they might hide.

That's not strictly true, I suppose. I do have a burning curiosity as to what is down there, but my primary focus must be on who killed Gertrude Robinson, and I do not believe for a moment that it was a wall-moving spectre from the depths of the earth. No, far more likely it's one of my colleagues. Elias is a prime suspect, but it could have been any of them.

I have told Martin the second tape recorder was lost in the attack. Having two means I can make two tapes from each recording. One containing the main statement and notes, which will be stored in the archive, and the other containing the statement, notes, and… this supplement, which will chronicle my own investigations. These

tapes will be hidden. If you're hearing this, I assume you're my replacement, following my death or disappearance, and have received instructions on where to find them.

I have little more to add to this initial account, as I have only recently returned to my position in full, and haven't had time to begin personal investigations. My statement was, of course, completely true, though I have deliberately overstated my interest in the tunnels. If my colleagues believe that to be my main focus, they may let their guard down. This level of paranoia is new to me, but I'm learning fast. Trust can get you killed.

End supplement.

[CLICK]

MAG042 – Grifter's Bone

Statement #0131103

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Jennifer Ling, regarding a live musical performance she attended in Soho. Original statement given November 3rd, 2013. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Anyone who's written about music long enough has at least heard of Grifter's Bone. An urban legend, I guess you could call it. Not quite a ghost story, not quite a joke, not quite a real thing. Sometimes they're a band, sometimes it's just the one guy. If the story has them as a band, then the only one whose name the old timer knows – because it's always the old timers telling these stories – is a guy named Alfred Grifter. Some will swear blind it's his real name, others will just give you a knowing look and ask if it sounds real. Fact is, no-one knows a damn thing about him except the name he goes by, so it's all just story and gossip, but there's still plenty to go around.

Story goes of a mediocre musician with a hunger for more, who turns to the dark arts, usually devil worship or witchcraft, but gets it wrong. I've heard it told as a curse, a badly worded wish or even a devil that just gets mad at being summoned and beats him 'til his hands don't work. The end is always the same, though: his music is so grating, so gut-churningly awful, that he, or sometimes his band, have to sneak into gigs to play unannounced to any audience they can find. And the music is dreadful, a grim cacophony of discord and noise, too much to bear. You can always tell when Grifter's Bone has been on, they'll tell you, because of all the torn-off ears. They're not entirely wrong.

I've been writing for Earful for a while. Used to just be me, firing my music thoughts onto a blog, but a few years back my then-friend, now-boss Tommy Moncreef said he was starting up a music site, and would I write for it? I said of course I would, and now here I am running video content for it. Earful.com's only been around three years or so, but to be honest in the world of music sites, that gives us a pretty decent pedigree. Tommy's from the old school – used to write for dozens of music magazines, back in the dead tree days, before print became an embarrassing older relative that just wouldn't die. Point is, he knew a lot of older contacts and writers, most of which he brought on board for Earful. That means I was quickly brought up to speed on decades worth of London music scene gossip by middle-aged white men who only ever wore T-shirts for bands that ended tragically. And *that's* when I started to hear about Grifter's Bone.

Whenever someone was listening to some sub-par submission, or even just some music of their own that wasn't well regarded, one of the old timers, usually Mike Baker, would shout over, "I see you got the new Grifter's Bone album!" or "I didn't know Grifter's Bone reformed!" or something like that. It was annoying as hell, but I never really brought it up. And after hearing every possible variation of the story from a half-dozen drunken writers at our Christmas do, I just kind of decided to let it go.

I didn't think much more about it until earlier this year. There's a guy who works for Earful by the name of Lee Kipple. His official title is 'Submissions Editor', though we call it something a little more vulgar, and it's his job to listen through all the music we're sent unsolicited. CDs, MP3s; recently there's even been a weird fad for sending in music on novelty USB drives. He listens to all of it. As you can imagine, most of it's awful. Still, Lee is pretty much the nicest guy I've ever met, and I don't think I've ever once heard him complain. He's tall, a bit lanky, with long blond hair that covers his ears. And his eyes if he's not careful.

Because of his job, Lee obviously gets a lot of comments about listening to crappy music, and if it's one of the older folk you can bet they'll mention Grifter's Bone. It took me a while to notice how weird his reaction was when this happened. Whereas most of the staff would fake laugh, sigh or maybe swear a little, Lee would go very still. He'd nod gently, and reach up to scratch his ears, still mostly covered by hair. No-one seemed to notice.

I kept watching him, and the pattern repeated whenever the band

was mentioned. I don't know when I decided that he must have seen Grifter's Bone perform live, but I did. And more than that, I decided he must have fake ears, having torn his own off when he saw the show, and that's why he wore his hair so long to cover them. I didn't really believe it, obviously. It was just a fun little theory I liked to play around with. But the more I watched Lee, the more it seemed that he did deliberately try to keep his ears covered.

Finally, about a month ago, I decided to just ask him. We'd all gone out for drinks, and I'll admit I may have had a few more vodka tonics than would have been wise, but when the others had headed home and it was just Lee left, I decided now was the time. I asked him if they were as bad as everyone said. He looked puzzled, and I leaned in closer. "Grifter's Bone", I said. He froze, completely still. I waited for him to touch his ears, but instead he just stared at me, unmoving. He began to stutter something about not knowing what I was talking about, but I cut him off. It was written all over his panicked face; he had seen them.

I watched as he decided whether or not to try and run. There was a moment I was sure he was going to literally bolt for the door, but instead he sighed and nodded his head. It was four years ago, he told me, at *The Good Ship* in Kilburn. Lee had been watching an up-and-coming metal band whose name he could no longer recall – they'd been fine, a bit disappointing, so he was in a mood to finish his drink and leave. The rest of the audience seemed to be of a similar mind, so nobody noticed when a man climbed onto the stage, and set up a small keyboard.

The man was short, so Lee said, and painfully thin, wearing a ratty, old brown suit that draped around him like, in Lee's words, "flaps of ill-fitting skin". His thinning black hair was slicked back, and his face had a strange look of cruelty to it. As he placed his fingers on his instrument, they left behind dark red spots on the bright white keys. Lee said he had never heard of Grifter's Bone before that moment, but somehow he knew that's what he was looking at. And then the music started.

After he said this, Lee went very quiet. It was clear he was concentrating very hard. I waited, not wanting to interrupt, but in the end he just shook his head. He couldn't remember the music, he said. He'd tried, but it was just blank. He'd come back to himself wandering the streets of Kilburn almost two hours later, his shirt soaked in blood. Mostly his blood. At this, Lee unbuttoned his shirt and showed me a series of vivid scars slashed onto his chest. The hospital had said it was likely a box cutter of some sort, but he had no memory of it.

By then it looked like he was on the verge of tears, but I couldn't leave it alone. I asked about his ears. He actually laughed at this and said no, he hadn't torn them off. Reaching up, Lee pulled back his long, blond hair to reveal an ear that, at first glance, appeared normal. Looking closer, though, I saw that he was wearing earplugs, flesh-coloured, so as not to be obvious, and caked around the edges of them was a ring of dried blood. He said it was the only way he'd found to stop it dripping down and ruining his shirts.

I was a bit freaked out at this. Understandably, I think, though it

was entirely my own fault, and I had told him he needed to see a doctor if his ears wouldn't stop bleeding. Lee just shook his head, said he'd seen enough doctors to know they couldn't help, and that he had learned to cope with it. We drank the rest of the night in silence, before heading our separate ways.

I know I should have left it alone after that, and I certainly didn't bother Lee again. But I found I, I just couldn't let it go. Either Lee was mad, or Grifter's Bone was real. I started doing research online. There were a few sites that referenced it as an urban legend. There was a punk duo in Oregon who proudly announced that they had named themselves Grifter's Bone after what they described as "Britain's musical Jack the Ripper". There were a lot of posts on music forums from newbies to the scene asking what Grifter's Bone was. But nowhere had anything even remotely like Lee's story.

Finally, having kinda run out of steam, I threw my findings together into a short feature article, and sent it to Tommy, who dutifully approved it. I figured I'd wasted enough time on the subject that I could at least put it towards something decent for the site. It did alright, though it wasn't enough of a hit to justify the time spent on it. Lee didn't mention it when we next talked – I had asked if I could write up his experience after thoroughly anonymising it, and he'd shrugged and said fine. All in all, it felt like whatever it was that had hooked me, it was over, and I wasn't too broken up about it.

Then someone left a comment on my article. It just read, "Tonight. Soho." I wouldn't have paid it any attention if it hadn't been for the

second line: “No earplugs required”. Lee’s earplugs, and the reason behind them, had been the only thing he requested I leave out of the article. I mentioned it to Tommy, and he just said something about time-wasters, and how I had better things to do than spend an evening wandering around Soho, randomly walking into music venues.

It probably says something really depressing about my personal life that, actually, I didn’t have anything better to do. So that afternoon I was doing exactly that. Wandering around the streets of Soho, making a note of all the performers listed as playing that night. As expected, none of them listed Grifter’s Bone as playing, but I made a note of them anyway. It wasn’t that late, but it was already dark, the world illuminated by the colourful glow of the Soho signs and shop fronts. The wind was slow in the narrow streets, but still cut through my thin, woollen coat as I wandered, looking for a small, cruel-looking man in a ragged brown suit.

I’d kept my watch maybe an hour when I saw someone staring at me from the doorway of a small shop. The sign above didn’t have an obvious name, simply reading “Crystals. Books. Tarot”. He was tall, black and careworn, deep lines of worry etched into an otherwise handsome face. When he saw me looking at him, he began to walk up to me, still with that intense look. I took a couple of steps back, and asked if I could help him. He shook his head as if unsure what to say, then asked me what I was listening to. A chill ran over me as I realised he was staring at my ears.

I said I wasn’t listening to anything, as I wasn’t wearing

headphones, and asked him what he wanted. He shook his head again, and mumbled something about protecting my hearing. He turned away then, and started walking back into the shop. I was about to follow him when I saw a small group of people turning the corner.

Their features were hard to be sure of in the dark, but walking at the front, dragging a rolling keyboard case, was a short, thin man in an oversized brown suit. The three figures behind him were all much taller than him, but each was stick thin, and moved with a jerkiness to their motions. I looked back to where the strange, staring man had been, but he had retreated inside his shop, and the lights were now off, so I began to follow the man I thought to be Alfred Grifter, as he and his companions moved down the street. The others all carried instrument cases as well, and no one else on the street seemed to pay them any notice at all, not even when the tallest physically shoved a man out of his path.

Finally, they turned down a flight of stairs, into a basement jazz bar I didn't recognise. After a few seconds I followed them. The bar was dimly lit and quiet, with red and orange lights giving it a warm, smoky feel. Patrons stood around drinking and chatting. I counted eleven in total. I remember I made a note of the number because of how empty the place was. Most seemed to be dressed for an evening of jazz, but I noticed a few of them seemed to be wearing thick coats or jackets, and one, an older white man with a shock of silver hair, appeared to be wearing a silk bathrobe. Behind them, on the stage, Grifter's Bone were setting up their instruments.

Now, despite everything that happened thus far appearing to show the contrary, I am not an idiot. I remembered Lee's story very clearly indeed, and had no intention of staying for the show. Instead, I took out my phone, set it recording video, and placed it in a small alcove near the entrance with a good view of the stage. I checked to make sure the microphone was working, and then I left. I stood at the top of the stairs into that dingy jazz club and I waited.

After a few minutes of shivering in the cold, I thought I had made a mistake. The streets were deserted, and the previously mild November night had taken on a bone-deep chill. Then I heard it. Muffled through the walls, but still rising distinctly to where I stood, a note. A single, clear note, from what sounded like a cello. It was joined by others, a keyboard, a guitar, and over them all the pure piping sound of a flute. It was beautiful. It was some of the most achingly beautiful music I had ever heard. Then the screams began.

There was no build-up to the screams; no lead-up to explain the sudden eruption of sounds of agony. There were crashes as well, noises of impact and, once or twice, something that sounded like tearing. Through it all, in the background, played that beautiful music. I stood there, frozen in place, not wanting to go down there, but not feeling able to flee, as below all I could hear was haunting music and butchery.

I went to pull out my mobile to phone the police, but I realised I had left it down there, recording in the jazz club. I finally made the decision to run for help, when the noises ceased abruptly, and there

was silence. I looked around for anyone who might have heard the cries of pain and panic, and be coming to help, but there was no-one. Just me. I began to slowly, carefully, make my way down towards the basement. If whoever was down there wanted to kill me, I would be easy enough to find with the information on my phone. One way or another, I was at their mercy.

When I opened the door, it was hard to know exactly what I was looking at. In the dull red light, the torn and mangled remains of the people I had seen alive not half an hour ago were almost indistinguishable from the carpet and furnishings. On stage, the musicians calmly packed away their instruments. They did not have a spot of blood on them. The one in the brown suit, who I assumed to be Alfred Grifter, looked up. He gazed straight into my eyes and said, “Encore?” I grabbed my phone and ran.

I didn’t phone the police. I was too scared of what might happen. I watched the news obsessively, waiting to see anything on the massacre, but there was nothing. It’s been almost a week now, and I’ve heard *nothing.* I haven’t been able to access the footage from that night. My phone says it’s incorrectly formatted somehow, but I’ll keep trying. I did go back to the jazz club, but I can find no sign of violence, no sign of Grifter’s Bone, and no sign of the eleven people who died that night.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Our own investigations into the band “Grifter’s Bone” yielded little that Ms. Ling did not include in her own, remarkably comprehensive article “Spooks and solos: the slim pickings of Grifter’s Bone”. Certainly her statement appears to be easily the most detailed account of any encounter with the band, assuming it is to be trusted. The Dean Street Jazz Club strenuously denies any violence took place on its premises during the dates in question, and there are no police reports that seem to match up with Ms. Ling’s description.

Well, I suppose that’s not quite true. According to police reports, in the month of October 2013, there were a total of eleven deaths by violence in the Greater London area. It’s impossible to match the details of all of them based on the information in Ms. Ling’s statement, but one of the victims, Mr. Albert Sands, 67 years old, and beaten to death in his own home. Although it happened two weeks before the events of this statement, according to the police he was wearing a silk dressing gown when he was brutally murdered.

We are unfortunately unable to follow up with Ms. Ling; it seems roughly two weeks after giving this statement she assaulted Agatha Norrell, her elderly neighbour, with a claw hammer. Ms. Norrell was left in a coma from which she did not recover, while Ms. Ling turned the hammer upon herself. By the time the police arrived, she had done so much damage to her head that… there was no hope of saving her. I have an uncomfortable feeling she might have finally gotten that video to work.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplement. I've been watching Martin. He's been very attentive to my needs and recovery since I returned to work, almost to the exclusion of his own tasks. Previously I might have ascribed such ministrations to his own lax work ethic, but in the stress of Prentiss' attack, I am sure I glanced moments of competence, or even cunning, that are beyond what his previous work would indicate. Is he playing the fool? Purposefully failing in his tasks to delay or hinder my investigations? It's possible. He has also shown remarkable interest in my own theories as to who killed Gertrude. I have thus far diverted him by saying I believe it to be whatever is lurking in the tunnels below, but he seems… unsatisfied by that response.

I'm glad he's moved out of the Archives, as it gives me a chance to work here without his constant presence. Also because he managed to leave some of his possessions behind, for the most part it's just a few books of relatively awful poetry. There are a few pieces I feel could almost have been affecting if his style wasn't so obviously enamoured with Keats, but there is an unfinished letter addressed to

his mother in Devon, in which he mentions that he is worried about "the others finding out I've been lying".

It may be nothing, some inconsequential deception or other – after all, it is ostensibly written to his mother – but if it was actually to be sent to someone else… I will keep my eye on Martin.

End supplement.

[CLICK]

MAG043 – Section 31

Statement #0160919

[CLICK]

BASIRA

I really shouldn't be talking about it on tape.

ARCHIVIST

That's entirely up to you. You came to us.

BASIRA

Yeah… Just wanna talk about it with someone, you know?

ARCHIVIST

Very much so.

BASIRA

I'm breaking the law by talking to you. You understand that?

ARCHIVIST

I… think so. Some sort of non-disclosure agreement, I believe?

BASIRA

Pretty much. D-Do you need my real name?

ARCHIVIST

Technically no, but from what I understand of your situation, you'd be rather identifiable even without it. This is not the first time we've had statements from witnesses in sensitive positions. I'll mark the tape and file it for internal use only, which means it comes under the Institute's own, very strict, NDA policy and cannot be referenced or requested by external agencies or authorities.

Such as the police.

BASIRA

[Pointedly] That's the best you can offer?

ARCHIVIST

I'm afraid so, though I remind you again you are under no obligation to make a statement if it makes you uncomfortable. Or, if you're worried about your voice being recognised, you could always write it down. I'll make an audio copy later.

BASIRA

I'm not really big on writing. I'm more of a talker.

ARCHIVIST

Odd choice of career, then; *[attempting levity]* I hear there are lots of forms to fill in.

BASIRA

Not much since I became Section 31.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, you mentioned. This Section Thirty– you know what, we will cover it in the statement.

Statement of Police Constable Basira Hussain regarding her time investigating… strange occurrences as part of Section 31. Statement taken direct from subject, September 19th 2016. Statement begins.

BASIRA

…

Now?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

Right, well, first off, I'm not 'part' of Section 31. It's not like a unit or a division within the police force or anything like that. It's a form you have to sign. Section 31 of the Freedom of Information Act covers exclusions for information pertaining to law enforcement. It just means that any information that could interfere with the prevention or detection of a crime can't be given out as part of an FOI request. So what happens is, when you stumble

across something a bit… weird, then after it's over you're taken to one side, and told to sign a form officially declaring what you saw and experienced was directly related to a crime. Then it's covered by Section 31 and can't be revealed under the Freedom of Information Act. There's a whole bunch of other NDA stuff in there as well, but it basically means you have to keep quiet about it.

Thing is, signing your first Section 31 really marks you out. Word spreads fast in a station, and once they see you've signed one, people start to push you in that direction. They call you 'sectioned', which I guess is kind of appropriate? You're generally assigned to head out with others who've signed, and if any officers get a whiff of something weird from a scene, they'll wait 'til you arrive, rather than going in themselves and risk getting sectioned themselves. I suppose in some ways it's kind of a unit, but not one with any funding or training or official power. Just a bunch of burned out cops with a retirement rate five times the average.

That's why it took so long to get a car here when your friend found Miss Robinson's body. I was on a burglary call-out with Carver, the only other sectioned officer on shift, and you can bet no-one else was responding to a call from the Magnus Institute. No offence.

ARCHIVIST

None taken. And full names, please.

BASIRA

What? Oh, PC Richard Carver.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

I did notice you seemed less… taken aback by the large number of shrivelled silver worm corpses than I would have expected.

BASIRA

Yeah. I mean, that was easily one of the most disgusting things I've seen on the job, but not the weirdest.

ARCHIVIST

Shall we start at the beginning, then?

BASIRA

Okay, well, the first time I got hit with a Section 31 was five years ago, August 2011. I'd got my badge the year before that, and was still getting used to some of the more stressful bits of the job. The week before this happened, I'd heard an officer get his leg shattered by some arsehole with a cricket bat. We were speeding towards the scene, but couldn't do anything but listen to it over the radio. That sort of thing it, it does something to your brain; that mix of adrenaline and helplessness, so… so I was still a bit rattled when the call came in.

There was a fire out near Clapham – a residential home had gone up, and the fire brigade were calling for some police back-up. Apparently the homeowner was getting violent, and there were

suspicions of arson. I was riding with John Spencer back then. We didn't really get on – let's just say I wasn't a fan of the tone he always used when he said the word "diversity", though I never had enough to bring any real grievance about it. Even so, he didn't deserve what happened to him.

So we arrive at the smoking ruin of a house, and the firefighters have got it pretty much locked down, just a lot of smoke and damp rubble, except for where we see a couple of firefighters struggling to keep a guy restrained. He was a Hispanic male, probably mid-to-late 40s, heavy set with a completely shaved head. Another of the firefighters, this one with a fresh black eye, comes over to brief us. Apparently the guy had burst out of the house shortly after they arrived, not a single burn mark on him. The fire brigade had approached to see what help he needed, but instead he just started throwing punches and trying to run.

That was an assault charge, sure, but why the arson? The fireman just sort of nods to him, and I realise for the first time the bald guy's saying something. Not loud, but intensely. I mean, this was years ago, so I don't remember exactly what he was saying, but it definitely involved the words "cleansing fire", "all shall be ash" and the name Asag, which I later learned is some kind ofSumarian demon. So that's fun. I reckoned suspicion of arson was probably about right, and Spencer agreed.

So he went to arrest the guy, maybe calm him down some, while I got the handcuffs on. There's still part of me that feels guilty it was that way around. As I was cuffing him, there was this sudden

intense pain in my hand. It was just as I touched the metal to close them; it was incredibly hot. I once took a welding class, ages back, just kind of on a whim, and made the mistake of forgetting that just because metal isn't glowing red doesn't mean it isn't scorching hot. It was that same burn, too intense for your mind to process for a second, then all your nerves fire at once.

It hurt, is what I'm saying.

If I hadn't managed to get the cuffs closed before the pain really hit, I don't know what would have happened. As it was I ended up with some badly blistered fingers, while in front of me the guy leaned over to Spencer and whispered something right in his ear. I didn't hear what he said, but Spencer went completely pale. He was shaking slightly as we shoved the guy in the back of the car, and I had to drive us back to the station. He… refused to tell me what the guy had said.

Our arsonist's name was Diego Molina. He was assistant curator at some Mexican museum, come over with a loan to the Natural History Museum, but they hadn't heard from him for a few weeks. He didn't say much in questioning, though his English was clearly fine. Unfortunately, the arson case collapsed pretty quickly, so… we just had to slap him with assault and let him walk with a hefty fine. Spencer didn't exactly help matters by getting himself suspended. The only thing Diego Molina had on him when we brought him in, was a small book bound in red leather. They caught Spencer in Storage, trying to destroy it with a Zippo lighter. I never saw him again.

They told me he killed himself when he got home. Apparently he'd somehow filled the bath full of boiling water and just… just got in. Official story was he'd somehow done it using a kettle, which… that, that's just about the weakest cover-up I've ever heard.

[HEAVY SIGH]

Anyway, after that happened, and I'd explained my burned fingers, they gave me my very first Section 31.

ARCHIVIST

I see… I-I see. How many, uh, potentially paranormal events do you generally investigate – a-as a police officer?

BASIRA

None. No-one says the P-word. Not 'paranormal', not 'supernatural', not even 'spooky'. The words you learn to look out for are "weird", "odd", "strange" and if you hear the phrase "I'm not quite sure what I'm looking at", then yeah, you're not getting much back-up.

Almost all of them are false alarms. We get called to a lot of bad drug trips, animal attacks and folks with genuine mental health issues. Those are the ones that have the potential to sound weirdest during initial contact. I didn't get another genuine Section 31 case for… almost three years.

July 18th 2014. I remember because it was the hottest day of the year, and the air con in the car was out, so we were really suffering.

It was me and Alice Tonner, who… everyone calls her “Daisy”, but I can never get her to tell me why. Anyway, Daisy was sectioned years before I was even on the force. She’s never been that forthcoming about any of her own experience; takes Section 31 very seriously. The most I could get out of her was that she was originally sectioned for something she referred to as “spider husks”. The way she described it, it sounded like she’d found a bunch of shells, the sort crabs leave behind when they grow, but I could never figure out if it was meant to be the husks of people-sized spiders, or the spider-like husks of people. And Daisy never seemed like she wanted to clarify. I’m sure she mentioned vampires once as well, but… I think she was joking. Probably. Maybe.

Anyway, we were headed towards Kensington. This one had originally been called in for the ambulance, but then neighbours had reported gunshots, and we had a very strange call with the paramedics. They had specifically refused to confirm there was a gun on the scene so we didn’t send an armed unit. They were still on standby, but something in the paramedics’ report made the other responders decide they should wait for us to get there.

The building was pretty run-down for Kensington. Still nicer than my house, but, you know. The paramedics met us at the door and showed us up. The lift was out, so we headed up the stairs. On each floor I saw faces peering out of the cracks in front doors. They must have been the neighbours who heard gunshots. We, we carried on up, *[heavy exhalation]* until we reached a door that was already open. The lights inside were off; paramedics said they’ve all been

smashed. The windows had all been painted over, and it was like a boiler room in there. But, even in the gloom, it was… it was clear there was a lot of blood around. A lot of blood.

We found the 'victim' in the living room, sat on a large armchair. His face was a mess. We got a torch on him, and it was clear he'd been shot in the head multiple times at close range. He was male, white, youngish. Age was hard to guess from what was left of his face. His clothes were new, and there were a lot of expensive-looking trinkets about the place. A lot of old-looking domino sets in glass cases.

Daisy spotted the gun lying next to him, and went over to retrieve it while I-I checked the place for any other signs of life. I'd just turned around when I heard Daisy scream. The guy was moving, trying to gurgle something through what was left of his jaw. He was reaching for the gun. Daisy leapt for it, but it was right next to him and she missed. The man who… he should have been a corpse already… raised the gun, and pointed it into this… mass of flesh that was his head. Daisy grabbed the gun before he could pull the trigger again, and managed to wrestle the gun away from him. Then he made a, he made a noise, just… just a really horrible sound. I think he was trying to cry.

The paramedics took him after that. They didn't really want to, but it was clearly more in their domain than ours. I assume hospitals probably have their own version of a Section 31 those poor idiots had to sign later. Daisy and I told them we'd clear it up on the police side. Just a standard suicide, and the body was taken by the

ambulance. It cut down on the forms, and neither of us wanted to sign another goddamn Section 31.

ARCHIVIST

Fascinating. What other cases have fallen under this classification?

BASIRA

Officially, I've only had one other, and that was yours.

ARCHIVIST

Officially?

BASIRA

You get a few dozen calls a year from people who have strange experiences, but they don't have any evidence. I mean, if what they say is true, then it would be a Section 31, but… there's nothing that can be investigated or proven, so there's nothing to report. I always feel bad for them; they're always so sincere, so sure you can help, but unless they can point to the ghost or the spooky clown doll or whatever, there's not *really* a lot we can do.

I've also been quite lucky, to be honest. I've dodged quite a few of the nastier Section 31s over the years. I remember Harry used to get wasted and tell all sorts of grim stories.

ARCHIVIST

Ah, full names, please.

BASIRA

Sorry, Sergeant Harry Altman. Worked with him a few years back, before he retired.

ARCHIVIST

Right. So… just to return to, er, Gertrude's body. That's currently considered a para– a weird case?

BASIRA

I mean, we're investigating it as a murder because that's what it is, but you guys are basically an automatic Section 31, so I've got almost no help on it. Maybe that's why I wanted to make a statement, you know? I can't talk to anybody about this stuff, and then I come here, and you've got all this… all these people's experiences listened to and filed away. It's… I don't know. I've been meaning to come in ever since that callout.

ARCHIVIST

Mm. Yes. S-So um… so no-one is helping you with Gertrude's case? No oversight?

BASIRA

Not really. I tried making the argument that the murder didn't seem to connect to any of your 'paranormal business', at least not directly, but nope. I've got a shot corpse, three boxes of cassettes, and Daisy, who's CID now, which I suppose means it's technically

her problem, but she's now the only detective who's already sectioned so she's always way too busy. As far as I know, neither of us have even had a chance to actually start listening to the tapes.

ARCHIVIST

Interesting. Uh, listen–

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Obviously further investigation of the police cases to which Ms Hussain refers is out of the question. Ensuring that the breach of non-disclosure and spreading of confidential information remains hidden is our top priority in this instance. Further investigation, however subtle, could put that in significant danger. Beyond that, Ms Hussain did not appear to expect any such investigation. I can't say I blame her. Much as I value the deductive powers of my team, they are not trained detectives with the force of the Metropolitan Police behind them, so I imagine there would be little more they could unearth. Certainly nothing worth the risk.

If nothing else, it appears we now have a name for our mystery burn victim from Case #0121102. Diego Molina. And I have a suspicion I know where he got that book. It's a shame he's dead, of

course, but a piece of the puzzle is not something to be ignored.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental. I have convinced Basira to give me access to the tapes. It won't be many or often, as they are currently police evidence and thus hard to subtly remove, and she can't necessarily guarantee the ones I get will be the most pertinent to the case, but it is still a significant victory. I only ever spoke to Gertrude once or twice during her time as archivist. I-I was very new. I don't remember what her voice sounded like. Part of me worries about what I might find on these tapes, but a bigger part of me worries I will find nothing. This uncertainty is wearing on me, and I don't know how much more I can take.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG044 – Tightrope

Statement #9790302

[CLICK]

GERTRUDE

Case 9790302. Yuri Utkin. Incident occurred in the village of Algasovo, central Russia, November 1952. Statement given 2nd of March 1979. Committed to tape 15th of April 1997.

Gertrude Robinson recording.

GERTRUDE (STATEMENT)

As a child, I always loved the circus. I grew up in the little village of Algasovo, deep in the forest steppes. We were tiny, far below the notice of the district's райсовет 1, and as such we were quite a poor community, with little hope of being added to the circus routes as anything but a waystation. Every year he would take my brother Ivan and me, and we would make the journey down to Morshansk to see the circus as soon as it arrived.

Jugglers, acrobats, wild animals… it took my breath away every time. My favourites were the clowns. Not as you would think of them; I've seen what you call clowns in this country, but back then clowns would actually tell jokes, not simply hit each other and fall

over. I didn't always understand the jokes they told, but there was something intoxicating about sitting there, surrounded by people all laughing and cheering. Even if I didn't always share their amusement, I always shared in their joy.

I never liked the acrobats, though. I would watch them swinging from the top of the tents, leaping between the trapeze or walking their tightropes, and my chest would tighten, and all I could see in my mind would be the image of them falling to the sand-covered floor. I've never been afraid of heights myself, you understand; I used to spend half my summers at the top of the tallest trees I could find. When I was six, my best friend Piotr fell when we were climbing together. He survived, but broke his leg so badly that he still walks with a limp today. From that moment, that long terrible moment when I watched him fall, whenever I would watch the acrobats fly through the air it was all I could do not to close my eyes. Still, that doesn't change the fact that my visit to the circus in Morshansk remains some of the happiest memories I have of my childhood.

One day in early November, the circus came to Algasovo. To say this was strange is to put it very mildly. As I've said, we were a small village, and far below the notice of the troupes that travelled the region. More than that, winter was beginning to set in, and it should have been many months before the touring season began again.

Then, as now, all circuses were owned and run by the government, something that is taken very seriously, so the idea that it might be

an independent company that had simply found itself in Algasovo was unthinkable. There were always rumours of vagrants or travellers who would set up their own shows, but these would be small things, always half-ready to move on if someone reported them to the local сельсовет [2]. This circus was huge, easily as big as the ones I would see at Morshansk. The trucks rolled through the village shortly before dawn, and by the evening there it stood in the field to the east of town. Over the entrance stood a brightly painted wooden sign that read “Другой Цирк” [3], “Another Circus”.

I begged my father to go. He was weary, but it became clear that almost everyone in the village was planning to visit, even if only so they knew what to report to the сельсовет later. Soon a mob of us were heading through the icy November evening towards the colourful tents and bright lights. As we approached I heard a shrill, piping sound. I’d never before heard a steam organ – they had not been used in the other circuses I had visited, and I found the noise invigorating. There was something in its shriek that thrilled me, though it was the last time I would be able to hear such a sound without being filled with the deepest dread.

There was no fence around the outside, but instead the gate stood alone before the circus, with the name illuminated by gaslights either side. It was not a surprise that such a place would not have electricity like the ones in Morshansk, but still it seemed as though the flickering shadows cast by those lamps were starker than I was used to. Next to the gate stood a short woman in a leotard, seemingly oblivious to the cold. As the group of us approached, she

began to wave with a slow, languid motion and called over for us to come in. The circus was open, she said, and all were welcome. Her voice was strange. The Russian she spoke was perfect, but her accent, her intonation were all wrong; each time she spoke it was abrupt and repetitive, like a scratched record.

If my father and his friends noticed, they didn't show any sign of it, though they were suspicious enough already. I didn't care. I was too excited about the circus. Ivan was even keener than I was, and upon hearing this invitation, he burst out of the crowd and ran eagerly through the gate. And then it was as though some spell were broken, and the wariness seemed to disappear all at once. My father took my hand and led me through under that bright sign, paying the five roubles for entry.

Beyond it there were more gaslights casting their pallid glow on tents and wagons. That whistling steam organ still played, giving the place a feeling of life and energy, while the air was full of sweet smells. From behind the tent came the roar of a big cat, and I let go of my father's hand as I ran ahead to see. Sure enough, there, sat behind thick iron bars, was the vivid, orange face of a tiger. It regarded me with narrowed eyes, though it remained still. I was entranced. Its fur was shiny and thick, and its mouth curled open to reveal long teeth of brilliant white. I had seen bears and lions before, and once even an elephant, but I'd never seen a real-life tiger before. I leant closer, until all that was between us were six inches and some rusty iron bars.

As I stared at this beautiful creature in front of me, it moved its

head. It was the strangest thing to watch. It seemed to shift its position slowly, like a doll having its joints twisted, but its face remained completely still. The mouth stayed curled to reveal its teeth, the ears stayed alert and pointed forward, and the eyes still stared out, though where they had at first seemed brilliant, they now had an almost glassy look to them. Without warning it roared, the same powerful cry of violence that I had heard before, but as it did so I fell back in surprise. The tiger's mouth had not moved.

As I scrambled back, I felt a large hand on my shoulder, and looked up to see two huge men in overalls. They lifted me easily, so my feet hung almost two feet from the ground. They talked fast, crude Russian, and their words seemed to shift back and forth between them, telling me that behind the tent was off limits, and that I should leave the tiger alone as it wasn't ready to perform yet. At least, that's what I thought they'd said at the time. It was only later that it struck me their exact phrase had been that the tiger "wasn't finished". They carried me back to my father and placed me down next to him. He thanked them, and asked me if I'd seen my brother.

Ivan had not returned after he ran off through the gate, and my father was growing concerned. He was standing talking to a pale man in a flamboyant red coat, whom I took to be the ringmaster. This brightly-dressed man said there was no reason to be alarmed, that he would ask his people to be on the lookout, and that Ivan would no doubt return when the show was about to start. There was much to explore in the circus, he told my father patiently, and children often let their excitement get the better of them in this

strange new place, but they had never lost one yet. This last part he said with a smile that I think was supposed to be reassuring, but reminded me too much of the tiger with its shiny, unmoving teeth.

I left them arguing there and went off to find Ivan. In my ten-year-old's mind I was sure that I would be able to figure out where my younger brother had wandered to. I would return triumphant, and my father would tell all the village of how well I had done. As I walked, I became fascinated by the flickering gaslights, some clear and bright, others behind coloured glass, and decided that Ivan would also have been drawn to them. So I followed them round the tent, and through the wagons and trucks, until I found myself standing before a smaller tent, set off to the side of the big top. There was another wooden sign across the top. This one appeared to be written in English; I did not then understand what it said. Knowing what I know now, I believe it said, "Freak Show".

Now you must understand that the freak show was not part of a Soviet circus. Indeed, I believe even in America the practice has been out of fashion for many, many years, so I did not have any idea what to expect when I went in looking for Ivan. What I saw inside is one of the main reasons that I am so sure that my experience deserves to be in your library. It's the reason I went to Moscow to study medicine, for the people, if such they can be called, that I saw in there were of such grotesque proportion and bodily forms that I became obsessed with learning how it was they might still live.

It was only when I was many years into my medical training that I

finally accepted that, scientifically, such things were not possible. A mouth cannot function if it's located anywhere other than the face. Limbs cannot bend like rubber. A man cannot walk and talk and stare without a head. You will, I hope, forgive my lack of precise descriptions. It has been 27 years since that night, and I can no longer clearly distinguish between what is memory and what is nightmare.

I walked along the row of cages. Those few other patrons who had found their way to this tent turned around quickly, leaving with pale faces and shaking legs, but I was determined to find Ivan. I closed my eyes as I walked, opening them only momentarily every few steps to check if he was there. I called out, but there was no reply, either from my brother, or from the silent things in their cages. Finally, I reached the end of the tent. The last cage was empty, save for a large hessian sack. It was tied by thick rope, wrapped around so tightly that it bulged through the gaps in its binding. I took momentary comfort in the fact that it was far too big to be Ivan. Still, I found myself approaching it, curiosity momentarily overcoming my growing sense of dread. Then, in the distance, the steam organ began to play, announcing the start of the show, and the bag began to move.

It contorted itself, pulsing and throbbing like a wounded animal's stomach, and fell heavily forward. I screamed and fled out into the frozen night. It was only when I was about to pass back out through the wooden gates that I stopped, remembering that, even if Ivan had fled like me, my father was still in this terrible place. I resolved

to rescue him, and turned back towards the main tent. Light spilled out of the open entrance, as the steam organ kept playing.

I entered to see two clowns fighting. Not the slapstick routines of the clowns I'd been used to, rife with wordplay and satire, but a crunching violence I had never seen before. One of them, huge and scowling in white and purple polka-dots, pinned down its smaller companion, whose bright yellow shirt was now streaked with red. With each blow from the big clown, the crowd, among whom I could clearly see my father, howled with laughter and cheers. The laughter didn't sound right. None of it was right. It was as though I was looking at a tent full of vicious strangers, every one of whom wore a face I had known since birth.

Then my gaze drifted upwards, to the tightrope stretched between the towering tent poles, and my heart stopped. Halfway across, tottering on legs too short to balance properly, was Ivan. Everything else was forgotten as I watched him there, and the sounds of the world around me faded away. The question of how he had got up there, or made it halfway along that thin metal wire, didn't even enter my mind. I could think of nothing but that next step that would send him tumbling to a floor caked in sand, greasepaint and blood.

No-one else in the audience or the ring seemed to have noticed him up there, and my throat had closed too tight to call to them. I could do nothing but watch as Ivan took another step along the tightrope. He swayed to one side, then the other, and I could see he was crying, tears falling to the floor like single drops of rain. He took

another step. And then another. He did not fall. I watched in amazement as my seven-year-old brother walked and walked. My heart was still clenched in fear, and I could not breathe. Ivan took his final step, lifted his right foot, and placed it upon the platform on the opposite tent pole. He had made it. He gripped the pole and moved around it and out of sight.

I do not know how long I had stood there watching, but it seemed like only a moment later I felt my father's hand grip me by the shoulder. I turned to see him standing there with Ivan by his side. He had a look on his face as though he had eaten something that had spoiled, and without a word he led us out of the circus and back to our home. The field was empty by the next morning.

No-one in our village ever spoke of that night, and when the state circus came to Morshansk the next year, my father did not offer to take us, and we did not ask.

For many years, I thought that it might have been some strange dream or distorted memory, as no-one ever acknowledged that it had happened. But I asked Ivan about it when we were older, and he hesitantly said that he remembered the circus coming, but everything after running through the gate was a blur. I pressed him further on the subject, and he just shook his head. He didn't remember what happened, he said, but he still got terrible nightmares. Every November, around when the circus had come to Algasovo, he would dream that he was there again. He could smell the sawdust and hear the steam-organ playing, but he could not move. In the dream he would find himself tightly bound with coarse

rope and trapped inside a thick hessian sack. I remembered those nights. He always woke up screaming.

GERTRUDE

Final comments: sounds, from what I can tell, like Yuri Utkin and his brother were rather lucky in their encounter with the circus, as both escaped with only significant mental trauma. A decidedly tame result for a run-in with Gregor Orsinov's troupe, especially as this would have been during the height of their tour. If it was in the 70s, after Denikin had left, then maybe it would come as less of a surprise, but as it stands, I think it somewhat amazing that the whole town appears to have made it through in one piece. Obviously it's a good thing the children survived, but it does pique my interest in Ivan Utkin. Unfortunately, he appears to have passed away in 1984, but he must have been something rather special.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental. This is the first of the tapes I have received from Basira.

Luckily it appears that Gertrude was not as lax in properly marking *these* tapes as she has been the rest of the archive. While it provides

some interesting context for Leanne Denikin's statement, and this strange circus, I will admit to some disappointment it doesn't address any of my more pressing questions about Gertrude's tapes.

Why did she begin recording them? And why stop? If she'd been doing so right up until her death, she would've likely gotten through much of the archive, and… moreover I wouldn't have had to find this tape player tucked away in the storage room, covered in dust and cobwebs.

Moreover, she clearly knows a lot more about what is going on than I had previously assumed. This is far from the first time she has encountered 'The Other Circus', or 'The Circus of the Other', or however it translates. I suppose I'll have to return the tape to Basira, and wait until she can get me another one. It is infuriating to have to simply… **wait** like this, but there is little else I can do.

Additionally, I think someone may have found these… secret tapes. They do not appear to have been disturbed, but the drawer in which I kept them is slightly more open than I left it. I have not mentioned it to the others, as if any of them did open my drawer for innocent reasons, then I don't want to let them know there is anything significant about the tapes inside. I have prised up one of the floorboards, and will be hiding them beneath there from now on.

End supplement.

[CLICK]

1. “raysovet” or “district council” ↩

2. “selsovet” or “village council” ↩

3. “Drugoy Tsirk” ↩

MAG045 – Blood Bag

Statement #0110209

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Thomas Neill regarding his experiences working in malarial research during the spring of 2010. Original statement given February the 9th, 2011. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I hope you'll forgive the handwriting. The shaking has gotten better over the last few months, but it's… still quite hard to read. Also my therapist has recently changed up my medication, so if I get a bit muddled, that's why. Just to be clear, my medication and treatment have been in response to the events I'm describing here. I was not taking any drugs before or during the event I'm setting down. I only started my treatment course after Neil's death.

I've been working as a research assistant for about six years now. Anyone who tries to sell you the career with promises of money, fulfilment or grand discoveries is a liar. The work is long and

repetitive, the discoveries will be credited to the fellows, at least until they're disproved or irrelevant five years down the line, and the money is… uh, well… the money is actually not too bad, at least not until the grant dries up halfway through the project.

I guess what I mean to say is that, when I finally managed to get on a project doing something I really believed in, I was prepared to overlook a lot. It was malaria research at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. I was working under Dr. Neil Thompson. I'm pretty sure he hired me just because of how similar our names are: Thomas Neill and Neil Thompson. There was always a little moment of confusion whenever anyone asked for 'Neil'. I think he got a kick out of it. That's the sort of person he was, not mean-spirited or nasty, he just liked a bit of harmless chaos now and again. Balanced out his precision in the lab, I suppose, because in there he was the sort of rigorous, meticulous scientist I didn't think existed outside of fictional medical dramas. Put it like this, he wore a white lab coat, and it was always immaculate. I don't know if you realise how genuinely impressive that is working in a lab, especially given as our work was messy. Very messy.

We weren't working on malaria directly, you understand. Our work was on the anopheline mosquitoes themselves, transmission capable but… not infected, though you'd hardly know by the reaction if one got loose. We're talking panicked fleeing, lockdown, and trained staff coming in to kill the thing. I always used to think that level of caution was ridiculous, given our mozzies didn't actually have malaria. Not so much anymore.

We were trying to synthesise a sort of ‘blood substitute’, a combination of the sugars and proteins that the mozzies need to survive, but one that was more enticing than a human full of blood. The idea was to create a, a lure of sorts, which would keep the mosquitoes concentrated away from people, and could potentially be used to poison them, though that bit was some ways in the future. At this point most of the research was spent trying to perfect the ‘taste’ of the thing, for lack of a better term.

The smell was also a big factor, as we needed the mozzies to choose it as a source of protein over a human, and as it progressed, it turned out that the texture and composition of the feeding bag itself helped attract them, so it ended up getting more and more like, er… human skin. The later bags even had little bits of human hair embedded into them, which made the whole thing several shades too grotesque for me, but the mozzies went mad for it, and as far as Neil was concerned, that’s all that mattered.

After about six months we had pretty much perfected it, to be honest. We had a lure bag that the mozzies preferred over a human sample in 98 per cent of cases, in which they consistently demonstrated a willingness to return to over alternatives. The issue was the cost. Our synthesised blood substitute, which we liked to call ‘haemoglobish’, was simply not cheap enough for mass production, especially considering the bag requirements, and as we were dealing in prevention rather than cure, we were always going to be compared to the cost effectiveness of just buying a boatload of mosquito nets. And that wasn’t going to be a comparison where we

came out on top. We kept going though, trying to recreate the effect with cheaper, more easily available materials, but that was when Neil first started muttering darkly about funding.

Here's where I should probably say a bit about Neil's syringe. Now, our Dr. Thompson claimed to be descended from the 19th-century physician, John Snow, a great-great-nephew or a great-great-great-grandson, or something like that. I'm not sure how much you know about epidemiology in the 1850s, and it's certainly a common enough name, but Snow was pivotal in laying the groundwork for the germ theory of disease transmission, and is widely credited with helping end the cholera outbreak of 1854. I only bring this up because Neil had… well, I suppose you could call it something of a totem. It was an old Victorian syringe, which he claimed had belonged to this illustrious ancestor of his.

I don't know if it was true or not, but Neil certainly treated the thing like a relic. He kept it in excellent condition, with glass shining and brass polished, and would carry it around in a small case tucked into his lab coat pocket. Whenever he was called upon to do any calculations or look over results, his hand would slip into that pocket, and he'd gently clutch that case. So, you can imagine that it came as something of a surprise when he came to me, and asked for my help in selling it.

Now, according to Neil, our project's grant money had run out, and without alternative sources of funding, we weren't going to be able to continue the work. I'm not sure how much I believed him, as the word around the lab was Neil had something of a gambling habit.

In fairness to him, I'd heard all sorts of baseless gossip flying around about everybody, and honestly don't know how the money worked for our project. I'd just signed the contract and took the pay cheques, it never occurred to me to investigate our funding myself, so he might have been telling the truth. He might have been trying to save the project. It didn't really matter, as by this point Neil and I were quite close, so… if he asked me to do him a favour, I wasn't exactly going to refuse.

When I say he asked for my help selling it, that's not *exactly* accurate. He'd already found a buyer, some antiques dealer who Neil said had offered him six figures for it. That sounded mad to me. I mean, it was a valuable trinket, sure, but… that's all that it was. Neil didn't seem entirely convinced the guy was on the level either, which was why he asked me to come along.

I'm a big guy, six foot seven, fourteen-and-a-half stone, so I can cut a pretty intimidating figure if I need to, especially if you don't know that I've never thrown a punch in my life. That's what Neil wanted me to do, just be there, have his back while he went to meet this guy, so he'd know not to try anything. I don't remember the name, I'm afraid, but he was foreign; Indonesian, I think, or Samoan.

I expected the meeting to be after dark in some dingy dockyard, but as it turned out they'd arranged to meet at The Three Greyhounds pub in Soho the following afternoon. I wanted to dress to intimidate, but I didn't really have any appropriate clothes, so I just wore a suit. As it turned out, I needn't have bothered – this overly generous antiques dealer was almost as big as I was, and unlike me,

he looked like he could handle himself.

He didn't even look at me when he entered the pub, almost deserted at that time on a Tuesday afternoon. He sat opposite Neil, while I stood awkwardly just outside their booth. They talked hurriedly and quietly to each other, and I couldn't make out many of the words, though it seemed like they were just discussing the price for the syringe. Eventually I saw a couple of briefcases exchange hands, and that was it. The dealer got up and walked out, holding a suitcase that seemed much lighter than the one he'd come in with. Neil gave me a relieved nod, and headed back to the laboratory with his own suitcase, that I can only assume was full of cash.

This is when things… started to go wrong. When things started to get weird. I don't know if it had anything to do with Neil selling that syringe. I mean, I don't know how it… *could* have, but that's when the trouble started.

The first thing I noticed was the heat. Now mozzies need to be kept at a temperature of around 23 to 24 degrees Celsius, which might not sound too hot, but at this point it was late May and we were started to head towards summer, so on a sunny day the room where we kept the cages felt… stifling. But as the days wore on, the heat started to seep out into the rest of the lab, until we were all coated with sweat for most of the day.

We called the building manager to get the heating checked, and he told us everything was working fine. He even agreed to turn on the air conditioning for us, but it made no difference. The lab was

warm and humid, everything felt *sticky,* and I took to bringing in a change of shirt for when I left at the end of the day. Luckily none of the chemicals we were mixing into the faux blood bags were particularly temperature sensitive, or God knows how much work we might have lost.

That was unpleasant, of course, but there was no real evidence of it being paranormal. No, that didn't come until a couple of weeks later. The mozzies started acting *unusually.* We kept them in metal mesh cages so they're viewable at all times. There's a hole in the front which is lined with gauze that can be gathered up to make a seal or allow you access to the cage. Normally they're happy enough to flit about their cages. But then, without warning, they stopped. They landed on the cage and just stayed there. They were distributed almost completely evenly over the inside, to the point where it almost looked regimented, and then they would stay like that for hours. It was unsettling, and more than once the researchers retrieved some for testing, looking for any change that might have resulted in this altered behaviour, but everything came back normal.

Sometimes though, when I was working late, I'd look into that room, and I swear I would see a mass of mosquitoes in each cage, crowded in a thick clump around the gauze covering the entrance. I should have told somebody, but at the time I didn't know what I was seeing.

The mosquitoes' attitudes towards the fake blood bags changed as well. Instead of meandering round, landing, feeding, flying off,

feeding again, a few times, now as soon as the bag was placed inside, every mozzie in there would descend on it immediately, all at once, until the bag was completely covered in needle mouths and flitting wings. It genuinely started to scare me.

What really scared me, though, and everyone else on the team, was what came out of the blood bag afterwards. Shortly after they began exhibiting this behaviour, one of the other research assistants, George Larson, was retrieving one of the empty bags and returning it for disposal in the lab, when he stumbled, and it fell to the floor. When it hit the ground with a moist thud, it became immediately clear that the bag was not as empty as it had first appeared.

The blood substitute, the ‘haemoglobish’, was a clear, syrupy orange, almost like dark honey, but slightly thinner. What oozed out of the bag now was a deep, cloudy red. At this point nobody objected to calling in a biohazard. They took samples of the substance, and put us through a basic decontamination, and then I went home. Odd to think now that my thoughts back then were full more of curiosity than of fear.

The tests came back, and were as alarming as they were impossible. It was blood. Real blood. O Negative and infected with malaria. Not just malaria though, but yellow fever, hepatitis B and signs of cholera. There were other substances in the sample as well, that they were unable to identify. We were all told that we were to be quarantined immediately, and that our project was shut down until further notice. I remember standing there in the lab as they said

this. I heard a strangled cry from behind me, and turned around to see Neil, shaking his head over and over, his face a mask of rage and hatred. He wasn't looking at the people who had come to quarantine us though. No, he was looking at the room full of mosquitoes, as though they had planned this, as though it was purely through their malicious intent that he was watching his career burn to nothing.

Before anyone could stop him, he grabbed a fire extinguisher and ran into the mosquito room. God knows what he was hoping to achieve. Spray a few cages to death in some petty act of revenge, maybe? He never got the chance.

As he fumbled with the release mechanism, a tremendous buzzing filled the air, and suddenly I realised what they had been doing clustered around the gauze those nights. There was no time to pull Neil out, so I did the only thing I could. I shut the door.

Thousands of mosquitoes erupted from those cages, far more, I thought, that we could possibly have had on site. There was no way to count them though as they swarmed onto poor Neil; first his hands and his face, then beneath his clothes, until there was no part of him not covered with the things. He swatted at them, killing some, but there were just too many, and after a few seconds it was clear he was going into shock. He tried to scream, but that just gave them more places to drink from.

That was when I turned away. There hadn't been a single drop of blood spilled, but we all knew that Dr. Neil Thompson was dead. I

don't remember much after that. There was a lot of shouting and a lot of noise, then tests. Confused and worried academics asking me questions that, of course, I couldn't answer. It was almost a month before the world was in focus again.

The faculty have been all right to me actually, so I should probably be thankful. They were so keen to get this swept neatly under the rug that they just let me go, with such a glowing reference I just walked into a lab tech position at King's College. It's mostly helping students, but that's all right. I think I'm done with research.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Can't stand mosquitoes. Horrible things. Any solution to the issue of malaria that doesn't concentrate on wiping them out is not one that I have much time for. Still, this grotesque account doesn't give us many leads to follow. Obviously there's the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine itself, but Tim's investigation yielded little significant information. Apparently those staff who've been around long enough to remember the event, either didn't know the details or have been well briefed to keep their mouths shut.

Aside from the fact that Dr. Neil Thompson died in a lab accident on the 30th May 2010, there's little more to be found. Sasha managed to get a copy of the inquest report, which is… infuriatingly vague, but does list the cause of death as blood loss,

and the official verdict as ‘death by misadventure’.

I don’t think there can be much doubt that the antiques dealer is the curious Mr. Salesa. He’s now turned up enough that I can no longer write it off as a coincidence, and have been having a word with Rosie about whether we can make contact with him. Apparently he hasn’t been seen for almost two years now, with rumours in the trade running to everything from ‘he had a quiet retirement’ to ‘he’s trying to dodge a jail sentence’, or even ‘he was shot dead in Colombia for stealing a priceless artefact from a drug lord’. Whatever the reason, it doesn’t look like he’ll be answering questions any time soon, though I have urged Rosie to keep trying.

Aside from that, there’s little more we can do with this statement. Mr. Neill himself passed away last year. Martin hasn’t been able to get a hold of the official cause of death, but judging by the number of antibiotics the police report list as being at his home at the time, it must have been something very nasty indeed.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

I've been doing some digging into Tim, watching him. He's certainly doing his job, far better than I'd have expected, given his recent experiences. There's just one thing I don't understand: why is he working for the Institute? A First in Anthropology from Trinity College, five successful years spent climbing the ladder at a major publishing house, and then, out of the blue, he decides to come work for us.

Why? I can't find any other indication of an interest in the paranormal, nothing to indicate this area of study appealed to him. And why stay after everything that happened with Prentiss? Is it just loyalty or could it be something –

[DOOR OPENS]

MARTIN

Hey, I just wanted to check if you wanted a cup of tea?

ARCHIVIST

Uh…

MARTIN

Oh, oh, sorry, are you recording? I, I thought you were done for the day?

ARCHIVIST

I-I was. I am. It's…

MARTIN

Why do you have pictures of Tim?

ARCHIVIST

It… it's a performance review thing, going over some files for it.

MARTIN

But that looks like a picture of his house?

[RUSTLING OF PAPERS]

ARCHIVIST

[Abruptly] Confidential files that you… legally you shouldn't really be looking at them. Please, er, please leave, Martin.

MARTIN

Right, right. Right, right…

Did you want that tea?

ARCHIVIST

No. Thank you, Martin.

[DOOR CLOSES]

I need to find a better place to do these recordings.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG046 – Literary Heights

Statement #9981221

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Herbert Knox, regarding a repeat customer to his bookshop in Chichester. Original statement given December 21st, 1998. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

It's hard to know exactly where to begin when explaining to you what exactly it was that I experienced. There were many things that happened, each strange and inexplicable in and of itself, but I'll be damned if I can see how they connect to each other, except that they've all ended up involving the same student from the university.

His name was Michael Crew, though he normally went by Mike, at least to me. I'm not usually one to pay much attention to the students that come into my shop, especially during the start of a new school year. I have something of a soft spot for the antique when it comes to my furnishings, and that, combined with the age

of my stock, means that when new students arrive at the university, they generally regard the discovery of Lion Street Books as something of a curiosity. I've heard more than one comparison to that shop in Stephen King's *Needful Things,* whatever it was called.

Anyway, as I deal mostly in rare books and antiquities, they generally get one look at the prices and suddenly their interest dries up. Of course, there are always a couple of rich kids whose parents weren't able to buy their way into Oxbridge, so it's not a complete waste.

So it's rare that I have any cause to remember the face of my student customers. But Mike struck me the moment he walked into my shop. This would have been last September – I don't remember the exact date, though I'm sure if I looked up my receipts, I could tell you. He was short, barely over five feet, and very thin. Underfed, I remember thinking. It hadn't yet turned cold, but he wore a high-collared coat, and a thick scarf wrapped around his neck.

Now, I'm getting on in years, and much as I love my shop, the building can get a bit drafty come autumn, so I generally have the heating up quite high. It was clearly enough for him to become uncomfortable, wrapped up like that, and he removed the scarf to reveal a branching pattern of white scar tissue arcing up the side of his neck.

That was interesting, certainly, but it wasn't what actually caught my eye. No, what struck me most was that, rather than wonder or

curiosity, as I would see in the faces of the other students who found their way into Lion Street Books, this young man began scanning the shelves with an expression that seemed more like impatience.

He was clearly looking for something specific, so after a few minutes I asked him if I could help. Without looking up, he said he was after a copy of de Plancy's *Dictionnaire Infernal* – the older, the better. I only had a 1908 translation in stock, but I said I would make enquiries if he wished for an older edition. He didn't reply to this, nor to my casual inquiry as to whether he was studying demonology, or the occult.

He took it to my desk to buy it, and I started rooting around for the credit card machine, when I smelled the strangest thing. It was like just before a storm breaks – that sharp smell in the air. But looking outside, the sky was clear and the sun was shining.

Mike seemed to smell it, too, and he went very still. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a wad of cash. He quickly counted it out, grabbed the book, and was through the door before I even had a chance to ring him up a receipt. The smell faded as soon as he was out of sight.

I didn't know his name at that point, but it was far from the last time I saw him. He became something of a regular. Maybe once every three weeks or so he'd come in and check any new stock I had. He was interested in spiritualism, history of witchcraft, anything mystical, especially from before 1850. He also bought a

few books on meteorology, especially pre-enlightenment, and once a book on the work of Gottfried Leibniz – though I don't remember the title.

I have no idea where he was getting his money, but he had a lot of it. He was able to pay five figures for a copy of a 1559 printing of the *Malleus Maleficarum* without breaking a sweat. At some point, I learned his name. I mean, I certainly wouldn't have described him as a friend, or even close, but over the last year he'd easily been my most-regular customer.

That wasn't the only time I smelled that acrid tang in the air, though. Sometimes when he was in there, it would come again all at once. It never seemed to be coming *from* Mike, exactly, but when he was around the smell would just suddenly be there. It was the only time I would ever smell it inside, and when I did, Mike would just stop whatever he was doing and leave immediately. He wouldn't *run.* He'd just leave.

There was another thing, too. Whenever he was in, the lightbulbs in my shop would burn brighter. I didn't even realize this until he'd been coming for several months, as it was usually in daylight when he went shopping. But when winter made its presence known, his late afternoon visits began to take place after dark, and I noticed that whenever he came in, the shop got brighter. The bulbs would start to buzz very softly, and the filaments within them would glow with a surprising intensity. There was this strange electric crackling, and once I even got a shock when I turned a lamp on.

I never brought it up with Mike, though. I don't even know how I would have gone about bringing it up.

It was February when I got the Leitner book. I'd heard of him before, of course, though I'd never met the man. The rare book trade is a comparatively small world, at least within the UK, and his name would often come up whenever I was gossiping with my peers. Sometimes it was about which valuable piece he'd snatched for a fraction of its true value, or the ridiculous amount he'd paid for a book that everyone else was sure was a fake. Occasionally, there were more-unsavory rumors about his personal life.

So, even though I'd never personally made his acquaintance, I was well-aware of Jurgen Leitner and his collection. And when he disappeared in 1994, I was one of the many that heard whispers on the grapevine that a few of his books were back in circulation. I never thought I'd actually get my hands on one, though. Not until I heard about Kirsten's death.

Kirstin Bowman was a book dealer friend of mine down in Salisbury. I suppose you could call her a rival, in some ways, but we'd always been very friendly. In fact, there were a few years back in the 80s when we were very friendly, indeed. But we hadn't spoken much in the last year or two.

Well, in January of this year, she passed away. Lost balance on the stairs and broke her neck. To be honest, I wasn't as surprised by her death as I might have been – though it was rather alarming. Over the last few years the landscape of the UK rare books trade has

changed significantly. A lot of the big names in the old guard have gone missing or retired – or, sometimes, even been found dead.

The police even got involved for a while, as there was talk of maybe someone out there targeting booksellers. But they never found anything to indicate it was anything other than a coincidence. I suppose it's just an example of how one generation inevitably makes way for the next, but Kirsten was the first time it had affected someone I knew *well*.

What surprised me more than her death, however, was that she had made me her literary executor, and left me the vast majority of her stock. So it was that I came into the possession of a Leitner.

It was a strange one, all right. *Ex Altiora* or "From the Heights," was the name. It was custom-bound, in the late 1800s, from what I could see, though the pages looked to be significantly older than that. 17th-century, I would have said. It was written in Latin, and seemed to be a long poem in the style of Virgil, illustrated with some quite-striking woodcuts.

It told the tale of a small, unnamed town high on a clifftop, that sees a monstrous creature begin to approach. The poem is unclear whether it is a beast, a demon, or a god, as it uses the words interchangeably, but it is seen far-off, its head and body lost among the clouds.

The majority of the story details the villagers' attempts to prepare to do battle against this creature, but each time they devise a

countermeasure, the thing gets closer, and is shown to be far larger than previously-suspected, rendering their preparations insignificant. At last, when it is almost upon them, its impossible vastness undeniable, the villagers surrender to despair, and hurl themselves from the clifftop onto the rocks far below.

It was a strange book, and made all the stranger by the fact that it appeared to be utterly unique. I could find no record of it in any catalogue I had available, and after a few calls to a couple of museums and archives I knew dealt with similar texts, I was convinced that this may well have been a completely unique book.

This didn't please me as much as you might imagine, because what it meant was that I had an artefact on my hands: one that belonged far more in a museum than it did in a library. I'd only had a museum-worthy book come once before, and the process of authentication, and the work involved in selling it, had, quite frankly, not been worth the amount that I sold it for. Museums are not as well-funded as private collectors.

Beyond that, there was something about the book itself that unsettled me. Reading it was… disorientating in a way that I can't easily put into words. Especially the woodcuts, although they were just the village, or the cliffs, or empty forests, or mountains. They were quite crude in many ways, but certainly not unsettling. And yet twice when reading it, and observing the woodcuts, I fell off my chair.

Over the week I possessed it, I had enough dizzy spells that I had to

book an appointment with my doctor, although at the time I didn't make any direct connection between them and the book. I had bad dreams, as well. I don't recall them with any clarity, but I'm rather sure they were dreams of falling.

Mike came in at the end of that week. I wouldn't go so far as to say I was expecting him, but I'd put a half dozen books to one side for his consideration, as I assumed he'd be in at some point soon. As was his habit, he said almost nothing, and the cold February air was enough that he didn't even feel the need to remove his scarf, so only the faintest hints of that branching scar could be seen creeping out from below it. The bulbs crackled and brightened in his presence, and I presented the books I had chosen to him. He spent some minutes looking through them before pushing them back with a shake of the head. This was not unusual for him, and I took it as no insult.

I turned to put them back on the shelf, when I was almost overcome by a wave of dizziness. I gripped the back of my chair and steadied myself. When I looked back at Mike, he was staring at the Leitner book with a wild expression I had never seen on his face before. He pointed at *Ex Altiora* and asked me how much it was.

I started to tell him it wasn't for sale, but he had this look in his eyes – this furious desperation. It scared me, to be honest, and I had a sudden sense that this man was willing to kill me for that book. All this, combined with the discomfort I felt with the thing anyway, was just a bit too much for me. I named a figure that I thought was maybe double what it was actually worth, and Mike wrote me out a

cheque so fast that I thought his pen would go clean through the paper. For this, I *insisted* on ringing him up a receipt, and without another word, he was out into the rainy February afternoon.

And that would have been it. Given what happened next, I don't think I would ever have seen Michael Crew again, if it wasn't for the simple fact that his cheque bounced.

I didn't quite believe it at first. He had always been so willing to drop huge amounts of money on books that the idea of him not being able to *afford* something had never quite registered. But there was no mistake. After no small amount of consideration, I decided that the only decent thing to do was to actually go to him and discuss the matter. Maybe I could get the book back, maybe I could make alternate arrangements. Either way, I felt like I owed it to Mike.

I had his address on file from a delivery he had requested a couple of months back, so it was a simple matter to close up the shop early and make the short walk across Chichester to his flat – rather lavish by student standards, but easy enough to find. The sky was a bruised gray as I walked across town, and I was glad I had thought to bring my umbrella, as it was promising to be a storm. I recognized the smell from Mike's previous visits – though even then I didn't realize what it meant.

I reached his door and knocked. I was careful to be firm, but not aggressive, in my knocking, as I had an odd conviction that an overly confrontational knock would have made it much harder to

retrieve the book. I needn't have given it any thought at all. The door opened before I had even finished knocking, and I had the oddest feeling in my stomach, as though I was standing on the edge of a great drop, and I took an instinctive step back.

Mike stood there, looking terrible. From inside came the odor of a man who has not left the room or opened a window for some days. Strewn across the floor were pages and pages of scrawled Latin text, which alarmed me, until I saw the unharmed and whole book clutched in his arms. I started to explain what had happened and why I was there, but he didn't seem to be registering my words – just staring blankly at the space I occupied, as though he didn't notice I was standing there.

I remember I had just about reached the point of repeating the word "cheque" over and over, in the hopes he acknowledged it, when the first droplets of rain began to hit his window. Without warning, Mike's eyes went wide, in what might have been realization, or maybe just fear, and his face got so pale his branching scar seemed almost to vanish. Then the first peal of thunder rolled over us, and that smell hit me with such an intensity I could barely breathe.

I was on the floor before I knew what was happening, and turned to see Mike running full-pelt down the corridor, clutching the Leitner book. I must have hit my head, and my thinking was very muddled: I was convinced he was trying to escape with the book. With a determination that, quite frankly, I never would have expected from myself, I decided that I had to *stop* it. I had to *stop* Michael Crew

from stealing my Leitner. So I got up, umbrella forgotten, and chased him out into the pouring rain. We weaved our way through Chichester, lightning arcing through the sky in a way I'd only seen a handful of times in the 40 years I lived there.

I could just about make out the fleeing figure of Mike in front of me, and sometimes – when the lightning lit the sky – I could have sworn I saw someone else chasing him. It was hard to make out, as it only seemed to appear for those momentary flashes, but it seemed tall, thin, its limbs angular and branching. Like Mike's scar.

I don't know how he got into the bell tower for Chichester Cathedral. It stands separate from the main building, tall, imposing, and square, starkly-illuminated by the flashing sky. One of the doors at the base stood open, and I didn't stop to think how it had been opened before dashing inside and starting up the stairs.

The smell was so thick inside I gagged on the acrid stench. In my determination to chase a young man stealing a book, I had apparently completely forgotten my age, which returned all at once, and I collapsed slightly on the stairs. I began to climb then, slowly, towards the top of the bell tower. I have never been afraid of heights, but as I got higher and higher up those stairs, my head started to swim, and my heart was beating so fast I was honestly worried that I was in danger of a heart attack.

Finally, I reached the top flight of stairs. I could hear shouting from the bell room. It was Mike – he was screaming something that sounded like a chant, or a prayer. Most of it was in languages I

didn't know, but I could make out the words "altiora," "vertigo," and "the vast."

I reached the top, and there I saw Mike, standing before an open window. He held the book before him like a protective ward, and in front of him was a strange, branching figure. It crackled and fizzed, lit by a strobing white light, as though the lightning was within the room itself.

It was just standing there, like it couldn't approach. As Mike reached the crescendo of his invocation, with a cry of "I am yours," he leapt through the open window, and – presumably – to his death.

The strange figure cried out, a sound like tearing sandpaper, and seemed to be dragged through the window with him. The sharp smell vanished instantly, and I was alone in the dark.

I say "presumably" about his jumping almost a hundred feet to his death because, when I went out, I could find no body at the base of the tower. Neither could the police, who obviously treated me like a lunatic. When the sky cleared shortly afterwards, it became apparent that all the windows to the bell chamber were closed and sealed.

I never saw Michael Crew or the Leitner book again.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Michael Crew. Another name that seems to crop up more than once in relation to Leitners, and twice regarding this particular volume.

The events here seem to have taken place a couple of years after those of statement 9991006. Could his exposure to *The Boneturner's Tale* have catalyzed an interest in Jurgen Leitner? Or perhaps an early experiment? It seems as though he was attempting to use the book as protection against whatever was chasing him. Did *The Boneturner's Tale* not work in that regard…? And what was it that chased him, bringing that smell with it?

It is a shame that *Ex Altiora* was burned in the end. I would have been fascinated to read it – especially as there is one feature that I'm surprised Mr. Knox did not mention, comparing his statement to that of Dominic Swain in 0132806.

The book which Mr. Knox received did not seem to have a woodcut of the dark night sky, with the branching, arching design of the Lichtenberg figure.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

Someone else has been going down into the tunnels. When I came in yesterday, I noticed the trapdoor appeared to have been disturbed. It was unlocked. I confronted the others, but they all deny it, of course.

Someone must think there is more down there of value – unless they're trying to hide something. Searching or hiding, it could be either. I might try to set up a camera to watch the trapdoor, if I can find somewhere effective to hide it.

I did go down there to see if I could find anything, but it seems much as it did last time. The only difference *now* is… all the spiderwebs. They seem to have spread down there. I think I saw some of the larger specimens actually eating the remains of the worms. It was a… disconcerting sight, and I left almost immediately.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG047 – The New Door

Statement #0161002

[CLICK]

[SOUND OF PEN SCRATCHING AGAINST PAPER IN SHARP, FRUSTRATED MOVEMENTS]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Helen Richardson, regarding, uh… how would you describe it?

[PEN SCRATCHING CONTINUES]

ARCHIVIST

…Miss Richardson?

[PEN SCRATCHING CONTINUES]

HELEN

– uh, what?

[PEN SCRATCHING CONTINUES]

ARCHIVIST

Your experience, how would you summarize it?

[PEN SCRATCHING CONTINUES]

HELEN

Um, well, I've been, I've been trying to draw you a map, but, it doesn't, it doesn't *work*.

[PEN SCRATCHING CONTINUES; HELEN CAN NOW BE HEARD BREATHING HARD AS THE ARCHIVIST SPEAKS]

ARCHIVIST

– Right. Statement of Helen Richardson, regarding a new door in the house she was selling. Statement recorded direct from subject, 2nd October, 2016. Statement begins.

[PEN SCRATCHING CONTINUES]

ARCHIVIST

…

Miss Richardson?

[PEN SCRATCHING STOPS]

HELEN

There's no left turns. Look, *[paper rustles]* look, *none,* it just, it just turns right, it doesn't make any sense *[paper rustles]* no, it wasn't a spiral because you could, you could always go forward, I mean, I –

ARCHIVIST

[overlapping] [sigh]

HELEN

– I, I did *mostly,* just forward, and the paths never got *shorter,* like you were coming to a center, they just – kept going – it doesn't, doesn't make any sense! *[paper rustles]* Look at it –

ARCHIVIST

Ah, Miss Richardson –

[PAPER RUSTLES]

HELEN

Look at it!

ARCHIVIST

…You're right. This map doesn't make any sense –

HELEN

[overlapping] After a few turns –

ARCHIVIST

[overlapping] – it becomes a mess of impossible lines, yes. But it will be very useful for our investigation if you could start at the beginning, give us some context.

Tell me how it got started.

HELEN

What do you want to know? There wasn't a door. And then there was.

HELEN (STATEMENT)

I worked for Wolverton Kendrick. I still do, I suppose, I haven't officially quit, but I haven't been back there since this happened. We mostly sell properties around the Wimbledon area, sometimes as far as Collier's Wood. We specialize in well-appointed family homes for successful professionals looking to move further out of London. We've had a lot of success, and these days usually have anything up to two hundred properties on the market, most of them detached family homes or big well-appointed flats.

I've been with the agency for about eight years now, and I've done thousands of viewings for them, so believe me when I say there was nothing unusual about that house on Saint Albans Avenue. I mean – maybe the fact the owner was selling it for less than two million? Even then, it still wasn't *suspiciously* cheap, it was just a lovely

house in a good area, like every other house I sell.

But I think back to driving there, the trees seem darker than they should have been. The other houses sit there, sinister, behind their tall gates and empty driveways. But I think, oh, that's just my memory changing to fit what I know now. At the time, I don't think I felt anything except annoyance that I was going to be two minutes late to the viewing.

You know, what's funny, even after everything that happened, I actually have trouble picturing the house in my mind. It was so much like all the others. So… unremarkable.

And it's not like I've been *back*.

For most of the morning viewings, it was business as usual. I had the usual stream of bankers and executives asking the standard questions, occasionally livened up by a private dentist or a barrister. I walked around that house for the better part of five hours, and by the end I'd been in every room, and opened every cupboard, dozens of times. And I promise you, I *swear* to you: that door was not there.

He… came… at the end of the viewings. It was the last appointment, and although he didn't give his name, I am *absolutely* sure he was not Mr. and Mrs. Adrian Lombardi.

He was tall, maybe six and a half feet? And he had long, straw-coloured hair that fell onto his shoulders in loose ringlets. His face was round and unthreatening, although he stood so still when I

answered the door that it did rather unnerve me.

I asked him if he was Mr. Lombardi, and he said no, but that Mr. Lombardi wouldn't be coming, so he was here instead. It's not unheard of for some of our clients to send their people to viewings in their place, so it didn't seem like an unreasonable statement, even if it would normally, you know, be arranged ahead of time. I just, I just thought I'd missed an email.

I held up my arm for a handshake, but he just looked at it, and laughed, keeping his hands firmly by his side. That was when I first started to think that something might be wrong, because his laugh didn't… sound right? I, I don't know how to describe it, but it wasn't, it wasn't a *human* laugh.

I should have stopped there, and left, or called the police, but he'd already walked past me and into the house, and I started to give him the sales pitch, almost as a reflex. I decided that, since he didn't seem to be actively threatening, I'd just give him a quick rundown of the house and get out of there as soon as possible. He was strange, but I felt that if he did work for the Lombardis, then I didn't want to be rude, and have to deal with a complaint later? So I took him 'round the place.

He followed me. His, his eyes were always looking where I pointed, but he never seemed to take anything in, and he didn't ask any questions at all. At least, not 'till we reached the second floor.

We'd just climbed up the stairs to the top of the house. I went into

the first bedroom, and I started talking about its potential as a child's room or a study. The ceiling was quite low, and I thought I'd better warn him to be careful – but when I looked back, he wasn't there. I stepped back out onto the landing to find him looking at a new door. He asked me what was behind it, and I just stood there, staring.

It was a small, unremarkable door, painted dark yellow, with a matte-black handle. And it wasn't there before.

I had been up on that landing *dozens* of times already, and I *definitely* did not remember it being there. It wasn't, wasn't just that I hadn't *noticed* it, you have to understand that, it *wasn't there.* It *couldn't* have *been* there, I checked the floor plan I had with me, and obviously *[anxious laugh]* there was *no door* shown on it, it was an *exterior wall* on the *second floor,* there *can't* have been anything beyond it but *empty* air *[anxious laugh]* and a *significant* drop, except that I had made *several* circuits of the outside while showing off the garden, *[tearful]* and there was *absolutely no door* visible there, it was just a dark yellow door that couldn't *be* there.

The man asked me again what was inside, and I just stood there, staring at it with my mouth hanging open in shock. I honestly don't know how long I stood there looking at it. My strange client said nothing, and I'd almost forgotten he was there by the time I finally made up my mind.

I reached out and gripped the handle. It was warm. I turned it, and as soon as I did so the door swung open. I didn't need to pull it at

all. It opened slowly, but deliberately, like… it was keen for me to go inside. And beyond that threshold, where there should have been empty air over the garden, there was a long, windowless corridor.

It was lit by electric lamps attached to the walls every ten feet or so, and the walls were papered over in a swirling green pattern. Running down the middle of the faded yellow carpet was a rug, black and thick, that disappeared off as the path very gradually curved to the left.

On the walls were what at first looked like mirrors, but I, I soon realized that, while a few of them *were* mirrors, most of them were paintings or photographs of that same corridor from various odd angles.

Here's the thing: I don't remember going through that door. I remember standing there, looking down it with this… feeling of dread. And then I remember feeling a surge of terror as I heard the door close behind me with a click. I spun 'round, but there was no handle on this side, just a huge, smooth mirror. I saw myself stood in that strange corridor, and it looked like I'd been crying for hours. I hammered, shouted, I *threw* myself against the uncaring face of that mirror, and nothing happened. It didn't even crack.

I took out my phone. My mind was muddy, but… I don't know exactly what I was hoping to do, call the police, maybe? My colleagues? I, I think I might have wanted just to check the time. I had no idea how long I'd been in there.

When I opened the phone, all that was on the screen was another picture of the corridor, just like the paintings on the walls.

So I started walking down the corridor. Like… I mean, there was, there was nothing else I could do. It dragged on and on, bending almost imperceptibly to the left. Well, every once in a while there would be another corridor turning off to the right at a sharp angle. At first, I, I avoided these branching paths, thinking if I walked along the corridor far enough, it would *have* to lead somewhere. But after what felt like miles, I finally decided that taking one of the turns… it, it couldn't make things worse.

The branching corridors were identical. Mirrors, and paintings that mirrored them, were everywhere, and when I turned back, I think I must have gotten turned around? Because the left turn, that would have led back towards the door, wasn't, it wasn't there anymore. It was another long corridor, with paths off to the right.

The wallpaper was a different colour, though, I think. It definitely changed, but I never noticed it switching, I'd simply realize that it hadn't been red when I'd been walking – or, blue, or purple, whatever colour it was at the time. All the colours seemed to shift in that place. Even the yellow of the carpet, the black of the rug, it… felt like I couldn't trust my eyes.

Based… on the date of my appointment, and the newspaper I found later, I think I was in there for three days. It was, it was impossible to tell from inside, though I don't remember sleeping, or even feeling tired? I did spend a lot of time just… slumped in despair,

though, so maybe I slept then. I had no food or water, I got very delirious by the end. It didn't help it was so warm in there, although it often seemed like I couldn't stop shivering, like I was cold.

I was almost passed out from misery when I saw it. It was stood way off in the distance, a long way down the corridor. It seemed almost human, from a distance, but as it got closer, I saw that it was anything but.

Its body was thin and limp, and when it moved, it *shifted,* like I was watching it through rippling water. Its hands were swollen, and bits of them jutted out at annoying angles. It was, it was moving towards me fast, and as I looked I saw that all the pictures on the wall now showed this thing – although each distorted it differently, like a selection of funhouse mirrors – but all of them, *all* of them showed the hands as bulbous and sharp.

I looked around in desperation, trying to find any hope of escape. The thing was getting closer and closer, and I could hear that weird laugh again. And then I saw it. A mirrored frame that did not contain the creature.

I had no reason to think it would help, but I could see no other choice but waiting for death. So I *threw* myself at this empty mirror.

And just like that, I was out. I felt the cold night air on my face and, and wet tarmac under my hands and knees. It was raining. I turned up in Dulwich, of all places. I screamed for about five minutes

before someone came to help me.

I don't really know what else to tell you. I was hospitalized for a short while, until they were satisfied my dehydration wasn't going to cause any complications. And I spent a long time at home. Not opening any doors.

Finally, *[suppressing tears]* after the latest bout of nightmares, I decided to come to you and tell you my story. Maybe you can make some sense of this.

ARCHIVIST

…Perhaps. Leave it with us. We'll… do some digging and see what we can find.

HELEN

[tearful] You *believe* me, then?

ARCHIVIST

I… yes. Yes, I think I do.

One thing, though. You say you don't remember the man's name…

HELEN

I… I think he told me, but I just, I…

ARCHIVIST

– it wasn't "Michael," was it?

HELEN

…Yes! *Michael!* That was it…! *[vengeful]* Do you *know* him?

ARCHIVIST

Maybe…

We'll make some enquiries and get back to you, Miss Richardson. Thank you for your time.

HELEN

Right, well… I'll just leave you to it, then.

[SOUND OF DOOR OPENING SLOWLY AND SQUEAKILY, THEN CLOSING MORE-SLOWLY AND MORE-SQUEAKILY]

ARCHIVIST

…

Sasha!

[SOUND OF DOOR OPENING NOTICEABLY FASTER AND LESS-SQUEAKILY]

NOT!SASHA

Sorry, did you call?

ARCHIVIST

I, I've just had a statement from someone claims they met your Michael.

NOT!SASHA

Michael? The distorted Michael?

ARCHIVIST

The very same. I don't think we re-recorded your statement on him, did we?

NOT!SASHA

Did we need to?

ARCHIVIST

It was one of the tapes that vanished during the attack.

NOT!SASHA

Oh. Well, I can give it again, if you'd like, but I haven't seen him since.

ARCHIVIST

And you can't think of any further insights? Nothing you forgot to mention last time?

NOT!SASHA

I don't think so, no.

ARCHIVIST

Hmm. What are you doing at the moment?

NOT!SASHA

Reorganizing your “discredited” section. It’s a bit of a mess. If I may say so, John, I feel you’ve been a bit less conscientious about it, since you got back.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, that’s fair. Sorry, I… let me know once you’re finished, I’d very much like you on this case.

NOT!SASHA

Yes, will do.

[MICHAEL SPEAKS OVER DOOR CLOSING SQUEAKLESSLY AND RISING SQUEALING STATIC]

MICHAEL

Do you even know they’re lying to you?

ARCHIVIST

[overlapping] I, I, I’m sorry, I didn’t – can I *help* you? This place is off-limits.

MICHAEL

I disagree.

ARCHIVIST

Who let you in here?

MICHAEL

“Let?”

[Michael laughs. The sound is nearly-imperceptibly doubled, as if he is laughing from more than one throat, a fraction of a second out-of-sync with himself.]

MICHAEL

I’m afraid that isn’t how this works.

ARCHIVIST

You’re him.

MICHAEL

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

Michael.

MICHAEL

…

That *is* a real name.

ARCHIVIST

Are you here to kill me?

MICHAEL

No.

ARCHIVIST

Oh…

Why are, why are you here? Wh–

MICHAEL

I am simply collecting what is mine, Archivist. The one who entered my domain.

ARCHIVIST

…Miss Rich-ard-son? You own those hallways?

MICHAEL

What a *fffascinating* question. Does your *hand* in any way own your stomach?

ARCHIVIST

[overlapping] [muted] Ah –

MICHAEL

In any case, it doesn't matter: the Wanderer had a brief respite, but it's over now.

ARCHIVIST

Well, you're too *late,* sh-she's gone!

MICHAEL

[laugh] …yes… ah… did you notice *which* door she left through? *[continues laughing quietly]*

ARCHIVIST

[overlapping] Yes… wait… no, there was, there –

MICHAEL

[overlapping] There has *never* been a door there, Archivist, your mind plays *tricks* on you…

ARCHIVIST

Let her go!

MICHAEL

[laugh] No?

ARCHIVIST

Get her back here!

MICHAEL

[laugh] Are you going to attack me?

[ARCHIVIST YELLS IN PAIN AS MICHAEL CONTINUES LAUGHING QUIETLY]

ARCHIVIST

– who the hell are you!?

MICHAEL

I am not a “who,” Archivist, I am a “what.” A “who” requires a degree of identity I can’t ever retain.

ARCHIVIST

So… Michael isn’t your real name, what?

MICHAEL

There is no such thing as a real name.

ARCHIVIST

What are you talking about?

MICHAEL

I am talking about myself. It’s not something I’m used to doing, so I’m sorry if I’m not very good at it.

ARCHIVIST

You decided to appear down here and… stab me anyway!

MICHAEL

I wanted to *talk* to you. I intervened, to save you before. I, I'm interested in what happens now.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, well, *thank* you for that, I suppose… And you still haven't told me *why* you "intervened" at all. *[huff]*

MICHAEL

I'm normally neutral, yes. But the loss of this place would have unbalanced the struggle too early. I'm keen to see how it progresses.

ARCHIVIST

You make it sound like there's a… war.

MICHAEL

[heh] Then I will say nothing further. I wouldn't wish to tarnish your ignorance prematurely. *[giggle]* Goodbye, Archivist.

ARCHIVIST

This – wait –

[SOUND OF CHAIR OR TABLE SCRAPING AGAINST FLOOR;

ARCHIVIST YELLS IN PAIN AGAIN, POSSIBLY FROM MOVING TOO QUICKLY]

ARCHIVIST

Ah… *owww*…

M-Michael? Michael…!?

Ah. End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG048 – Lost in the Crowd

Statement #0100325

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement about Andrea Nunis regarding a series of encounters in the streets of Genoa, Italy. Original statement given 25th March, 2010, audio recording by Jonathan Sims, head archivist of the Magnus Institute, London. Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Travel has always been my passion. I remember as a kid my parents used to take us on trips to this small cabin in Wales. I was very young at the time, maybe four or five, and the cabin wasn't anything special, just cheap self-catering. It was all the holiday that our parents could afford, and I had to share a bunk-bed with my brat of an older brother, but I remember that every time we drove across that huge bridge from England into Wales, I got this rush of discovery, of exploration. Seeing new places, going further, travelling.

I've never looked back since.

As I said, my parents didn't have much money, so the first chance I really had to go beyond the U.K. was when I took a gap year. I'd saved for years to afford that trip, helped by an inheritance from a distant grandmother, and I bought a bunch of interrail train tickets and spent almost four months rolling across Europe, never staying more than a few days in any one place, and heading on as soon as I got bored. There were nights that I was unable to find a hostel and ended up having to sleep on the streets and I even slept in a graveyard once.

I'd pick up travelling companions for a few days here and there, but for the most part I would spend weeks without speaking my own language. I had adventures and saw wonders, and got into more than a bit of trouble on occasion. It was the happiest I'd ever been.

Since then, travel has always been my main joy in life. I got out of university with a good maths degree, and got a job as a programmer. It's a life of well-paid drudgery, but I don't care. Because it means once or twice a year, I can drop everything for a month and disappear somewhere new. The Grand Canyon, the Forbidden City, the Great Barrier Reef. That's my life. Everything in-between is just the intermission.

I suppose that's one of the reasons I've always had such trouble with romance or even close friendships. I can never take them seriously because they aren't a part of my "real" life. And in my real life, I travel alone.

I know it's a lot more dangerous, and people always tell me how

lonely it must be, but it really isn't. There's a purity to being alone when you travel. You can absorb the places you find yourself in so much better, take in the sights and the smells and the vibrations of a place in a way you just can't if you have to be mindful of another person's presence.

It isn't that I don't like other people, I do. I just can't travel properly if I'm with them. My 25th birthday last year, I decided to treat myself to another go at Europe. Obviously, I couldn't do another four months, but I figured that just the one would let me revisit my favorite spots in the south – Slovenia, Switzerland, Bavaria, Italy, maybe Monaco or bits of southern France.

I'm lucky, as a September birthday makes it pretty much the perfect time for European travel, and for the first weeks I was having a wonderful time. Heading down into Italy and revisiting Venice, Rome, and the beautiful views of San Marino. I avoided going as far south as Naples, which I recall as being a horrible place full of ugly smells and rude people, and instead started travelling north again via Florence.

It was in a Florence hostel that I met Ethan Taylor. Ethan was every inch the Australian traveler, tall and tan with slightly curly dirty blonde hair and a carefree attitude. I'd met literally hundreds just like him in every hostel across the globe. But for some reason, I really hit it off with Ethan in a way I hadn't with any others of his kind. I think it's because, when he talked about travelling, he talked about it the same way I did. He wasn't going around for fun, or because that's what every Australian does when they reach that age.

He travelled because he had to. And like me, he said, he always travelled alone.

We spent a few nights together in the hostel, much to the irritation of the other guests. But as much as I enjoyed his company, I didn't have any interest in travelling with him for long, and it seemed he felt the same way. It was with a sort of mutual unspoken discomfort that we found ourselves ending up on the same train heading north. It seemed like it would've been rude not to at least not acknowledge each other, so we sat in the same compartment and stared out the window.

It was alright, actually. Each lost in our thoughts as the Italian countryside rolled past. We'd been travelling for about two hours when Ethan looked over and asked me if I was planning to stop in Genoa. I said no, it wasn't a place I'd really considered visiting, and Ethan began to tell me about it. He'd been there a few years before, he said, and the coastline was beautiful, all clear blue ocean and narrow, winding lanes. I didn't have any other plans, so I said sure. And you know what? He was right. It was beautiful. The colorful houses climbing up the steep streets from the coast and the paths beside the sea.

The first day we stepped off the train I fell a little bit in love with Genoa. We checked into a hostel and for once decided to get a private room and dropped our backpacks from tired shoulders. We didn't need to say anything to know we'd be exploring the city on our own. Ethan would be revisiting cherished memories, and I would be discovering new ones. But neither of us wanted to do so

in company. Most of our time together was spent at night, dining, talking, or… otherwise engaged.

The first morning, I went for a long walk along the coast. The sea air was invigorating. And when the salt-tinged air sent cool fingers running through my hair, I felt so alive I nearly wept. I put all thoughts of returning to my dull, English life from my mind and relished my freedom.

There were a few others walking near me, but Italian is one of the few languages I've never managed to pick up even a small amount of, so their conversation was alien to me, and did not intrude on my precious isolation. As Ethan and I talked that night, I tried to put it into words, but without any real success. Even here, with the time to compose it properly, I'm still not sure I've caught the essence of what I felt.

Ethan, for his part, had told me of his explorations of the back streets of Genoa. He'd found himself in a small section of town that seemed older than the rest, he said, and unlike the rest of it, it was bustling. He suspected there might've been an out-of-the-way street market there, and was hoping to find it again tomorrow. Then we went to bed, and I got what may have been my last restful night.

The next day, I decided to find a nice local cafe and spend some time reading. It wasn't difficult to do, as, if there's one thing it's easy to find in Italy, it's coffee. This one was well-hidden and warmer than outside, even though the day was very hot for the time of year. I took a seat and ordered a coffee. I tried to read, but it was

so warm that even with the strong coffee in my hand, I found it hard to keep my eyes open and kept nodding off. It was after one such accidental nap that I saw him.

He was pale, scrawny almost, and looked utterly out of place. His loose, bright shirt was in stark contrast to his long, black hair. He was staring at me in a way I found quite uncomfortable. I mean, I know I'm not unattractive and I'm used to creepy guys staring at me sometimes, but this was different. He was staring at me with an air of concentration. Like he was trying to read something written very small on my forehead.

After about a minute of this, he got up and walked over to me. He took the seat opposite and sat down. He was still staring at me, and it became clear that I was going to have to start the conversation. So I asked him who the hell he was and what the hell he wanted.

He ignored the first question completely and said, in English, what he wanted was to have a nice holiday in peace. He said it in a really accusatory way, like I was ruining his holiday somehow, and I said so. He sighed and said that he wasn't in the business of helping strays and, well, I didn't know what help he was offering and I certainly didn't ask for it, so I got up to leave.

He apologized grudgingly and said that as he was here, he thought he should at least let me know that I was marked. He didn't know what by, but that it was close.

Was I married? Did I have a fiance, partner, friends? I told him no,

not really. I was just about sick of his stupid questions, but he sounded oddly desperate. Siblings? No. Mother? Of course I had a mother. Were we close, did I love her? I gave him a look and he again asked if we were close. I said yes, we were very close. And then I got up to leave.

As I left, I heard him call after me, telling me to remember my mother, to keep her face in my mind. I didn't reply.

Ethan didn't return to the hostel that night. At first, I assumed he was simply out drinking late, but as evening turned into night and that night turned into morning, I started to get a little worried. It was none of my business, of course, but Genoa wasn't an all-night party sort of town. I would've assumed he'd maybe just headed on without me, but his backpack was still in our room, untouched.

I wanted to dismiss it as paranoia, but my encounter with the weirdo in the cafe had left me a bit rattled. When the sun came up on the third day in Genoa without any sign of Ethan, I decided to go out and look for him.

My first move was to try and locate that street market he'd mentioned. Perhaps it wasn't just hidden away, perhaps it had been actually illegal, and he'd gotten caught up in something he shouldn't have. He'd given me a good idea of the rough area of Genoa it'd been in, so I started my search there. I found nothing. Asking around just yielded a barrage of confused Italian from passers-by who I couldn't talk to.

So, I just kept walking. Morning turned into afternoon and the previously sunny day became overcast and oppressive. I would occasionally half-heartedly shout out Ethan's name, though I don't know what I was expecting.

At first this got me annoyed shouts from nearby windows, then glares, and eventually they got no response at all. The streets I was walking were narrower and narrower, and the houses and buildings next to me seemed to get taller with each turning I made, their previously vibrant colors muted under the cloudy sky. The afternoon was completely silent.

I began to think 'how long has it been since I saw another person?' Twenty minutes? An hour? Two hours? I hadn't checked my watch, and my mind was foggy- it was hard to think in all the humidity. I went to take a drink from my water bottle to find it empty – had I finished it? I couldn't have been searching that long.

Then I heard it from up ahead. The dull murmuring of a crowd of people, that rolling babble of incomprehensible noise that only comes from dozens of voices talking at once. Relief washed over me and I headed towards the noise.

The street I was heading towards was wider than those that I'd just been walking and seemed better lit somehow. Best of all I could see a constant flow of people travelling down it in both directions. Perhaps this was the street market Ethan had mentioned. I stumbled out into it and began to look around. I couldn't see any stalls or shops, or anything that might explain the presence of so many

people, but I didn't have time to really think about it before they started bumping into me.

It didn't seem deliberate, but there were so many people, far more than I had thought at first, and they couldn't move without jostling or pushing me. The flow of people dragged me this way and that and I was surrounded by that noise, that mumbling noise of the crowd.

Now I was inside, though, I realized it wasn't Italian being spoken, or English, or any other language I recognized. The more I listened, the more I realized it wasn't a language. There were no words, it was just noise. Just a noise being made by the people around me. And I started to focus on those people. And that's when I began to scream.

Their faces were a blur, each and every one of them. It was like someone had recorded them screaming or having a seizure, and then played it back at a hundred times the speed on their face. None of them had hair or any distinguishing marks, and though their clothes were different, they were all different versions of the same clothes.

I tried to talk to them or to shout, to scream at them, but there was no reaction. I tried to push, to punch, or kick them, but they were pressed in too tight, and I couldn't do anything except get buffeted this way and that by them.

This crowd of people, they weren't people. It was just a crowd. A

crowd without any people in it, and I was still completely alone. It was then that, as I felt my grip begin to slide, and I worried that I would lose myself to the crowd forever, that the words of that strange man in the coffee shop came to my mind.

Think of your mother. And I did. I thought of her face, the smell of her perfume, the long rambling phone calls made whenever we got the chance. I closed my eyes and remembered in as much detail and with as much love as I could muster in my despair.

I didn't notice when the bodies around me stopped pushing, or when the droning sound of the crowd stopped. Eventually, I opened my eyes again. It was night and I was on a street I didn't recognize, with an old Italian couple staring at me like I had gone mad. It took me another hour to find my way back to the hostel. And I made sure I was always in sight of at least one other person.

I didn't search for Ethan any further. I had as much of an answer as I was going to get, and left his backpack in the hostel in case he ever made it back to collect. I doubt he did.

I cut my travels short after that, came back by as direct a route as I could, and spent some time at my mother's house. I haven't been travelling since, but I have some time off coming up and would like to head out again. I might see if I can find a friend to come with me, though. I think it might be awhile before I'm ready to travel on my own again.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

An interesting encounter, though difficult to follow up given its location. Sasha arranged a supplementary interview with Ms. Nunis, who reports she has recently started travelling alone again and has not had any further problems. Martin has confirmed that over the last decade, there have been several travellers reported missing in Genoa, but averaged out, no more than is normal for a city of its size. I don't quite know whether this means that few travellers go missing in Genoa, or that a lot of travellers go missing everywhere else.

I'm curious about this coffee shop stranger Ms. Nunis met. His description puts me in mind of Gerard Keay, though there isn't much to it. If it is him, then he must've taken this trip shortly after he was acquitted of his mother's murder. Fleeing the country for a while, perhaps? Maybe there were rumors of a Leitner in Genoa. Maybe he was genuinely on holiday. No way to tell without more detail.

I am sure of the accuracy of this statement in one area, however. Tim managed to get in contact with the Manina hostel in Genoa, and they confirmed that just over six years ago, they had a backpack logged in the lost-and-found under the name E. Taylor. It was never claimed.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

Supplemental.

Michael's visit last week has been playing on my mind. What struggle is he talking about, and if there is one, what's his stake in it? What even is he?

Listening back over his visit, I am also struck by something that in the confusion of his arrival completely passed me by the first time. His words were a warning that I cannot trust Sasha. That she was lying about something. Of course it has become rapidly apparent in my investigation that I can trust nobody.

But of all of them, Sasha seemed the least suspicious. I can't find any evidence she ever even met Gertrude. And her working here seems the natural progression of a lifelong interest in the paranormal. She's been doing her work with the same diligence as before the Prentiss incident, and indeed, of all of them, seemed to have been the least affected.

That said, she did lose the tape documenting her experience. Or is she lying about her meeting with Michael, leaving things out? Or is Michael simply messing with my head, as indeed seemed to be the entire purpose of his visit?

On another note, I need to be subtler in my inquiries. Here follows a recording I managed to make of a short meeting Elias requested –

ELIAS (RECORDED)

I don't enjoy having to have these meetings, John, you know I don't.

ARCHIVIST (RECORDED)

Well, I'm sorry you're compelled to. I assume you've had another complaint.

ELIAS (RECORDED)

Yes.

ARCHIVIST (RECORDED)

Who from this time? Was Dr. Elliot offended I declined to take his apple? Was I too rude to Michael?

ELIAS (RECORDED)

Who's Michael? No, it's from your team.

ARCHIVIST (RECORDED)

What?

ELIAS (RECORDED)

Martin and Tim both approached me. Apparently you've been spying on them.

ARCHIVIST (RECORDED)

Spying on them? Of course not – No, it's just… I've been… worried about their mental health following Prentiss' attack, so I've been keeping a closer eye on them than usual.

ELIAS (RECORDED)

Tim says you were watching his house.

ARCHIVIST (RECORDED)

I – Well, that's just not true.

ELIAS (RECORDED)

Well, what matters is your team thinks that it could be. Look, I – I know finding Gertrude's body hit you hard, I understand, but you need to leave this alone. It isn't their mental health that's under scrutiny right now.

ARCHIVIST (RECORDED)

Fine. Is that all?

ELIAS (RECORDED)

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

I need to be more careful about the others noticing my investigations. Especially if I've further cause to watch their homes. More importantly, though, I think Elias just moved to the top of my

suspect list. I wonder what he's hiding.

End supplement.

[CLICK]

MAG049 – The Butcher's Window

Statement #0081103

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Gregory Pryor regarding his investigations into one Hector Laredo during the summer of 2007. Original statement given March the 11th, 2008. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

You don't mind me drinking in here, do you? No – of course you don't. Bet half the guys who roll in here are leaking Scotch all over your precious paperwork. I'm sober enough to write it down – for now, at least – and that's all the matters to you, isn't it?

I'm a private investigator. It used to be police, but not anymore. None of your business why – you can draw your own conclusions, if you want, but it's not something I care to talk about.

Anyway, last June I got a job from one Nicola Laredo. She was the wife of a lowlife by the name of Hector Laredo, and was keen to

change that to ex-wife – except that there was some kind of prenup in the mix, and she was looking to catch him cheating, which is where I came in. Standard stuff, pretty boring really but it keeps the wolf from the door.

My first investigations didn't turn up much. Checking Hector online was pointless – if he owned a computer it wasn't for hooking up or making friends. Impersonating him to the phone company was also a waste of time – only numbers he called regularly were his brother, his wife, and the Chinese takeaway at the end of his road. Lazy ass.

I reckoned he had a second mobile, but couldn't find any obvious paper trail for it, so I decided to take my investigation to the next stage. I began to tail him.

Hector was exactly the kind of guy I always end up following: heading into middle-age with nothing to show for it but half a head of hair and a beer belly straining against work shirts that always have some kind of food or sweat stain proudly on display. A loser. I know I'm not one to talk, but I couldn't help sympathizing with the wife, and not just because she was the one paying me.

Hector worked IT for some shipping and delivery company with its admin center down in Liverpool Street. I say he "worked" there, but that could easily be a lie. Even though I wasn't able to get past the front desk, the sheer number of smoke breaks Hector took out front cast some serious doubts on whether he was doing his job at all.

According to wife Nicola, Hector had recently had a sudden series

of “working late” nights, and based on what I was seeing of him at the day job, she was right on the money with her suspicions. There was *no way* this guy was staying a minute past closing.

Sure enough, hanging around his office, I saw him shuffling out the building shortly after six. I started shadowing him carefully, although after a few minutes, it became clear that I *[heh]* really didn’t need to be cautious as all that: the man was completely oblivious to anything that wasn’t inside his own head, or in front of his face, and after a while I found I could walk literally fifteen feet behind him the whole way, and he had no idea.

I knew I was in luck when I saw him head into the underground. His route home should have taken him down the Central line, but instead he headed on to the Hammersmith & City, riding east. Whatever, or whoever, his illicit liaisons involved, I was pretty sure that me and my camera were following him right to it.

He got off the train at Barking, which was promising. It was exactly the sort of place I would have expected the lover of someone like Hector to live: residential, depressing, and cheap. For London, at least.

It was almost seven o’clock by this point, and it was late June so there was still a while before nightfall, and I got more careful about my pursuit. There were less people here, so blending into a crowd was no longer an option, and I made sure to keep a bit more distance as he walked down streets of terraced houses.

We'd been walking for about twenty minutes when I began to realize that he wasn't going into any of the houses. Instead, he made his way south until he reached the A13. He made his way over the motorway, now choked with commuter traffic, and headed down into what looked like a warehouse or industrial estate on River Road.

I was becoming less and less convinced that this was a simple screwing-around job, which made me uneasy, but it was still a long way from scaring me off. Besides, I was curious, so I followed Hector over the A13 and down River Road. I was going very slowly now, as I was the only one walking down that road except for Hector, and if he turned around, well, idiot that he was, I don't think even *he* could have failed to spot me.

So I stayed close to the buildings, and ducked behind them whenever I could. I'll be the first to admit I'm not as fit as I was back when I was on the force, but I was still quick enough to keep up with Hector's slow, meandering pace. After another five minutes, he reached a warehouse with a "For Sale" sign on it. There was nothing else notable or distinctive about the place, and the sign looked like it'd been up for years.

I spotted a small hole in the decaying concrete wall that divided it from the adjacent lot, and made for it. Through the hole I watched as Hector stopped and – for the first time – looked behind him. When he saw nobody, and nodded like he was congratulating himself on a job well done *[heh]*, I almost laughed so hard I gave myself away.

Hector checked his watch, clearly waiting for someone, and put down his briefcase. It was only then I realized how odd it was that an IT tech would carry an old-fashioned leather briefcase to work.

Still, I didn't have much time to wonder about it before a red SUV pulled up, and two white guys in tracksuits got out and started heading towards Hector. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but I was snapping pictures anyway. I had a pretty good idea as to what was going on, and I was not at all surprised when they handed Hector a brown envelope obviously full of money. In return, he opened the briefcase to show a tight white brick, before snapping it closed again and handing it over.

I took plenty more pictures before slipping away unnoticed. Drugs complicated matters, but not necessarily in a bad way. *Theoretically,* pictures of the crime could get Nicola out of her doomed marriage just as quick as any sleazy snapshots. And if I played my cards right, I could even make a good bonus out of him myself, in the form of some hush money.

"Blackmail" is an ugly word, but it does pay the bills. And given how bad Hector was at spotting me, it was only a matter of time before he was behind bars, so I might as well get some use out of that sweet drug money before it was taken by the courts. I mean, he took the briefcase to *work* for God's sake.

The trick was going to be making sure that Hector wasn't connected in a way that would make this difficult. From what I could see, he was pretty low-rung, and expendable enough that a bit of blackmail

wouldn't piss off any of the bigger fish trafficking what *looked* to be heroin.

Still, drug dealers and their bosses can be unpredictable, so I decided to keep watching the poor slob for a while to make sure I wasn't going to be stepping on the wrong toes.

So, for the next week I watched Hector all day, every day, and I can confidently say that he was the *worst* drug mule I've *ever* come across. I knew some *real* screw-ups back in my police days, but nothing that even came close to Hector Laredo. I genuinely had no idea how he ended up working for these guys, who I eventually pegged as Ukrainian mafia.

I suppose he did look like the last person you'd suspect of running drugs, but *[heh]* that was the only thing he had going for him. In addition to being unbelievably oblivious, he was also sloppy and forgetful. I once watched him leave the suitcase, drugs and all, on his front porch for *three hours* in broad daylight before he remembered and came back for it.

Ironically, I didn't actually see him *lose* the drugs. I needed to use the bathroom in a coffee shop I'd followed him to, and when I got out he'd moved on. Sometime in the two hours it took me to find him again, he'd managed to put the suitcase down and forget it. It was gone.

I saw realization cross his face as he began to panic. This was bad news for both of us – worse for him, of course – but it did mean that

I wouldn't be making my bonus. I followed him a while longer out of morbid curiosity, and watched as he tried to explain himself to the Ukrainians.

I expected anger, a beating, maybe even a murder right then and there. But instead they just exchanged a look, mumbled a few words to Hector, and handed him a small slip of paper. Then they drove away,

Hector looked at the paper, typed something into his phone and threw it away as he walked off. It was an address in Stockwell and an instruction: "Ask for Jared."

I didn't follow him that time. I was pretty sure they'd just handed the poor idiot a death sentence, and when Nicola called the next day to say Hector hadn't come home, I was sure. At this point I came clean to her about her husband's activities, although I did lie about the timings to make it seem like I'd only just discovered about the drugs. No need for her to know why I'd kept it to myself. When I told her about the loss and the note, she sat down, clearly trying to process everything.

She didn't seem particularly broken up over the fact that her husband was most likely dead, something that was quickly confirmed when she started moving on to talking about savings and life insurance.

That's when I should have taken my payment and gone. If I hadn't gotten greedy, I'd still have my arm.

So I was all set to leave when Nicola asked me how long I thought it was going to be before they found a body. Stupidly, I said that if the Ukrainians were any good, there probably wouldn't be a body to find. At this, Nicola seemed to panic slightly, asking a lot of questions about missing persons and being declared legally dead without a body, which is a long, drawn-out headache. She clearly didn't want to wait, and asked me to try and find some evidence that Hector was dead.

I said no, of course. Then she named a price that – well, let's just say Hector Laredo's life insurance policy must have been a hell of a thing. Even at the time I knew I was making the wrong decision, but… that much money… I said yes.

So the next day I found myself in Stockwell, at the address listed on the note, staring at a butcher's shop. No name was written over the front, but the display of chilled carcasses and slabs of meat in the window made it perfectly clear what it was.

I started to wonder if the Ukrainian mafia was involved in some full-on Sweeney Todd body disposal, but quickly reminded myself that even if – and it *was* a big "if" – they were killing and disposing of bodies there, it didn't mean they were selling the meat to the public. That would be a massive and unnecessary risk, and organized crime wasn't big on unnecessary risk.

It was a sunny day, and the smell of the hot tarmac mixed with the odor of raw meat that drifted from the door. It had a "Closed" sign displayed prominently despite the time of morning, and there were

no interior lights on.

I couldn't see anything inside except the old, poorly-refrigerated meat hanging in the window, dripping silently onto the trays below. I reminded myself how much money was on the line, and tried the handle.

To my surprise it was unlocked. I slipped inside the shadowed storefront before anyone spotted me. The smell was rancid, but not as strong as I had expected. A quick glance around the place told me why. Aside from the window display, the room was devoid of meat. In fact, there didn't seem to be much there at all, aside from a refrigerated counter and drinks cooler. Both sat empty.

I waited and listened, prepared to bolt through the door at the slightest sound, but it was quiet. I gathered myself and made my way around the counter to open the door into the back.

I was keeping an eye out for anything that might have given a hint as to Hector's fate. As soon as I had proof, I was gone.

The door to the back opened with a puff of air, like there was a change of pressure, and I noticed how thick the steel door was. Even the glass porthole at the top seemed a few inches. It was only later I realized it must have been soundproofed.

The room behind it was lit by several bright fluorescent bulbs on the ceiling and walls and – much as I suspected – looked closer to a morgue or an operating theater than a butcher's shop, despite the well-kept and razor-sharp tools hanging on a nearby rack. There

were several large lockers along one wall, a steel chair in the corner, and, though there were no stainless steel drawers, the tarpaulin-covered shape that lay awkwardly on the central table was disconcertingly familiar.

I took a breath and pulled back the plastic sheet. Hector Laredo lay there on the table. He was naked, utterly still, and though he seemed to be in one piece, his skin had the sickly pallor of a corpse. I sighed, relieved at this discovery which – from *my* perspective – was about the best result I could have hoped for.

I spent a minute or two taking pictures for Nicola and headed back towards the door. And that's when everything started to go horribly wrong.

When I reached the doorway back into the shop front, I took a second to glance through the window, and I froze. In the entrance to the shop stood a huge hulking, silhouette. It reached to push it open, and I staggered back into the room looking for another way out.

There was only one other door, apparently into the rest of the building, but it was firmly locked, and I didn't have time to try and get through.

Without any other options, I covered Hector back over with the tarpaulin, opened one of the lockers, and squeezed myself inside. Luckily for me, they were large, and didn't seem to have any shelves. I stepped on something soft and, looking down, saw a

rough pile of clothes at my feet.

I didn't have time to consider this before I saw the door begin to open; I had to shut myself in. I stood there in the dark, trying not to make a sound, as I heard heavy footfalls approach, and the door to the room slammed shut. From my position I could just about see out through the vents in the locker, and I very much hoped the huge guy now strapping on an apron could not see in.

He was immense, almost seven feet tall, with thick limbs that looked like they had been badly-carved out of lumpy rock. Even his head was massive but there, like everywhere, his skin was on show. It bulged slightly when he moved, hard bumps forming and stretching his skin in odd places. Was this the "Jared" mentioned in the note?

He pulled back the tarpaulin covering Hector's body, and cracked his knuckles. I don't think I'll ever forget the sound of him doing that.

Then, he *reached* into Hector. No cutting, no saws, he just – *reached* in. And I realized why the room was soundproofed. Because it turned out Hector wasn't dead. And it was going to be a while before Jared got around to his lungs or throat.

Jared pulled out what appeared to be a handful of ribs. He considered them for a few moments before he began to twist them like warm putty, making them into some sort of braid. He considered his handiwork silently, as Hector lay screaming on the

table, before he shook his head and walked towards my locker.

For a terrible moment, I was sure he was gonna wrench open the locker and pull me out. But instead, he grabbed a crowbar that had been resting against the wall and levered up one of the metal floor tiles. From where I was standing, I could see there was a hole underneath that seemed to disappear deep into the ground.

There was something… not right about that hole. The texture of the walls was too smooth to be earth, and it seemed to… glisten wetly. It was when I saw the teeth that studded the inside of the fleshy throat that I realized what I was looking at, and I choked back a scream.

Jared casually tossed the bones he had been twisting inside, and they disappeared into the dark opening without a sound.

And so it went on, for four grueling hours. After the first Hector wasn't conscious enough to scream anymore, but Jared continued to bend and warp him, occasionally pulling bits out and throwing them into the pit. Once I even saw him take one of Hector's femurs and, after twisting it into a corkscrew spiral, he reached into his own torso, and left it there with a sigh of contentment.

At last, Hector died, and I *[shudder]* almost wept with relief. Jared sighed in what sounded like disappointment, and then fetched the butcher tools from the wall. It took him another half-hour to fully dismember the corpse, tossing each piece into the pit when it was small enough, and hosing the blood down into it.

He removed his apron, walked to the chair, and sat down. His movements were sluggish now, uncoordinated, almost like he was drunk.

Once in the chair, his huge frame slumped forward, and his eyes closed. It looked like he was asleep. I should have waited longer, should have made sure he was fast asleep, but I was close to breaking point at this stage, and I could think of nothing but escape.

I opened the locker and walked quickly, silently over to the door and opened it. As I did so, the gentle sounds of the street at night filtered through from the shop front. Compared to the grim silence of the butcher's workshop, it was beautiful. At least, it was until an ambulance roared past, siren blaring at full volume. I heard a roar from behind me, and turned to see Jared charging towards me.

It was like a strange, lumpy freight train bearing down on me. I tried to close the door but I was too slow. Just before it slammed shut, he grabbed my arm, and tried to pull me back.

There is no way to describe what it feels like to have bone pulled out of you through your unbroken skin. If you've ever been stabbed, or had a decent sized object embedded in you, maybe you can remember how it felt to have it removed, but even then the pain is of a different quality. The nerves aren't being torn or cut, they're being pushed aside like water. Imagine the feeling of removing a rubber glove from your hand, but you're the glove, not the hand. And it hurts like the worst toothache you can imagine, it, it – that's

as close as I can get to putting it into words.

I slammed the door shut and ran into the street, through the people still wandering Stockwell in the evening, and away, my now-empty left arm hanging limply by my side. I didn't stop running for a very long time.

I guess in many ways it was a happy ending. The photos, combined with what the police found when they raided the butcher's shop, were enough to declare Hector dead, even without the body, and I got my payday from Nicola Laredo.

They never did find Jared though. He was long gone when they arrived. The doctors amputated the arm in the end, and I'm getting used to the prosthetic, but I can still feel it sometimes, like it's still there.

I know it's just phantom limb syndrome, but sometimes I swear it feels like my bone's still out there, twisting in someone else's arm.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

I don't think it's unreasonable to assume this butcher to be Jared Hopworth. It seems that, if Mr. Adekoya's account from statement 9991006 is accurate, then Hopworth has found new ways to profit from his abilities in the eight years since his acquisition of *The*

Boneturner's Tale. The book itself is conspicuously absent from this account, though it may simply mean Hopworth no longer needs to keep it with him.

No idea about the pit, though. That's new. Its description puts me in mind of some of the more… *meaty* statements, but there isn't enough evidence to make any direct connections. Mr. Pryor was unavailable for a follow-up interview, as he emigrated to New Zealand in 2013, following a four-year jail term for tax evasion. He seems to have largely dropped off the map.

Nicola Laredo confirmed the basic details of the job she had given to Mr. Pryor, although she was unaware of any of the more… gruesome aspects of her husband's murder.

At least, she was until Martin interviewed her. I should warn Elias to expect another complaint.

The police aspect of this statement has been the hardest to follow up. Sasha has recently been having problems with her normal backdoor access to police records, as, despite IT's best efforts, her computer has broken yet *again,* making this the *third* time in the last two months. Until we can source some more reliable equipment, we may have to rely on other methods.

Basira has refused to compromise her position any further, so we're having to rely on Tim's involvement with certain staff at the police records office. Apparently, he is involved both with one of the young ladies there, as well as the gentleman who manages the other

shift. This *is* useful for acquiring information, but I am… uncomfortable with how easily discovered this arrangement might be. The last thing I want is for the Archives to become involved in pointless personal drama.

Still, he has managed to get copies of the appropriate files. The police did raid the butcher shop following Mr. Pryor's report, but found no one there. It had apparently been abandoned shortly before. They found articles of clothing belonging to roughly fourteen people, five of whom could be tied to active missing persons cases.

They did tear up the floor in the end, but rather than any sort of pit, they found the body of one Harry Gough, the registered owner of the business. He had apparently been dead for six months.

Jared Hopworth remains at large.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

Elias Bouchard is a difficult man to pin down. Certainly since he

became head of the Institute in 1996, taking over from James Wright, who ran the place from ‘73 until he passed away.

It was a remarkably fast climb to the top, as from what I can find, it looks like he only joined the Institute five years before in 1991, working in the Artefact Storage. Perhaps he was simply that impressive. Certainly the Elias I know now is almost unmatched in terms of paranormal knowledge. Well, theoretical knowledge, at least.

And yet, everything I found out about his life before the Institute seems… an ill fit with the austere man I know. He apparently graduated with a Third from Christchurch College in PPE, and I found *[incredulous laugh]* an old gossip column in the student newspaper, the Cherwell, that mentioned him. If I’m not reading too much into it, the implication seems to be that he was… ah, something of a pothead.

Was he like that when he first came to work here? The difficulty comes from the fact that the only person in the Institute who worked here before he took over… was Gertrude. Did he kill her because she knew something about his past? And if so, how can I prove it?

[long exhale]

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG050 - Foundations

Statement #8141206

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Sampson Kempthorne, regarding the workhouse architecture of George Gilbert Scott. Original statement given June 12th, 1841. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST

Dear Jonah,

It is my fondest wish that this message should find you in good health, as I have heard more than one mutual acquaintance remark on your current state of overwork. While I earnestly hope it is merely idle gossip, my knowledge of your character leads me to entreat that you allow yourself some respite, or at the very least take some further secretarial staff into your employ. Certain uncharitable quarters would have it that your life consists of little but rattling around an Edinburgh townhouse, surrounded by piles of ghostly accounts and lunatic documentation. Piles, I am afraid to

say, to which I am about to make an addition.

I would suggest you come visit with myself and Marianne as a diversion, but if you were of a mind to do so, you must travel swiftly. You see, we are shortly to depart for New Zealand, there to start a new life, far from London and its workhouses. And it is this imminent departure that has had such a freeing effect upon my pen. For there are things I have seen which I feel deserve a place among your asylum of letters.

They regard the works of my former assistant, George Gilbert Scott, whose own architectural practice is now most respected. I have been fearful that accusations of slander might dog me, were my tale to be set down, but with a boat to the new world beckoning, and your sterling reputation for discretion, I feel it may at last be time to divest myself of the disquieting scenes I have witnessed.

George came to me in 1834 from his engagement with the office of Henry Roberts, where he was completing his training. Henry himself I have the greatest respect for, as he trained under Sir Robert Smirke, who had received his knighthood not two years previous. Henry was very effusive about the talents and prospects of young Mr. Scott, and was at great pains to inform me that his young protege also received certain architectural tutelages from Sir Robert himself.

He said this with the oddest of looks, as though there was some jolly secret between us. I rather just nodded, as if to say I took his meaning, and he left well enough alone. He even showed me

George's work on drafting his plans for the Fishmonger's Hall near London Bridge, which had opened to great acclaim. It certainly seemed clear to me that he would make a fine assistant, at least for as long as I were able to keep him.

And so we began our brief collaboration, the subject of which was the workhouse, a topic – as I'm sure you recall – very close to my heart. The plight of the poor and destitute has been a national disgrace for far too long, and when I was handed the task of designing them by the Poor Law Commissioners, it was an undertaking I embarked on with no small amount of zeal.

My original designs were intended to assist in the easy segregation of inmates by sex, age, or infirmity, with capacity and utility foremost in my mind. I know many look on the workhouse with disdain, calling it "the Pauper's Bastille," and seeing very little distinction between the workhouse and the prison, but this is a deeply myopic view to take. The prison keeps its population for the safety and improvement of society at large, while the workhouse exists for the improvement of the inmates themselves. To criticize the conditions as harsh is to overlook the basic moral imperative of work itself, and I firmly believe that to dismiss the punitive as a valid form of moral improvement is to consign many a poor soul to perdition… but I digress, Jonah. I am so used to penning defenses of my designs that it seems I can write little which does not do so.

It was in his assistance with these designs that George first began to show those peculiarities of character that I would become so ill-at-ease with. His process redrafting was… deeply unsettling. He would

spend hours in the office simply staring at the drawings, saying nothing, taking no food or drink, ignoring any inquiry or interruption. Then, in a single move, he would gather up all the papers and retire to his private office, locking the door behind him.

Then from the other side that firm oak door, I would hear the strangest sounds, muttering and shouting. It was always in George's voice alone. I could never quite discern the words. It often sounded as though he were in some great distress, and on more than one occasion I was within minutes of summoning a constable to assist in breaking through the door, when he would emerge, glistening from exertion and holding completely redone drawings. I'm sure I even saw blood on his collar once.

The designs themselves were little better. He would take the solid functionality of my original plans, and remake them in all sorts of odd symmetries, which, while architecturally intriguing, generally sacrificed many practical considerations.

He also, without fail, made everything closer. Passageways would be narrowed, and sleeping quarters shrunk, until a building designed to hold 300 paupers would be remade to house almost twice that number.

As I mentioned before, I have no objection to harsh conditions within the workhouse, to dissuade the idle from taking residence there, but the cramped plans that George would present me bordered upon the claustrophobic, and I was generally unable to use them.

Each time I told him so, his face would tighten in momentary anger, and his lips would go white. Then I would watch as he took that rage and discarded it, once again becoming the genial, if somewhat serious, young man I had first met. It was an odd sight.

When his father died in 1834, it came as no great surprise to me that he chose to resign from my service. He told me he considered it necessary to become the provider for his family, though I have my suspicions he was also eager to no longer have his designs subject to my scrutiny. I wished him well, naturally, but could not honestly say I was not somewhat relieved by his departure.

It was shortly after this I received an invitation to a small social gathering hosted by Henry Roberts. It was there that I met Sir Robert Smirke. He was a tall man, with sharp, almost saturnine features, and eyes that seemed to regard you in ratios, and pounds of raw material. He was polite and gregarious, but I found him difficult to talk to at length, as he seemed to be forever further ahead in the conversation than I was. I could never be sure whether or not I was boring him.

When I realized that George was not present, and there was no sign of his imminent arrival, I resolved to raise the matter with Sir Robert, regarding what exactly his tutelage had entailed. At the mention of the name “George Gilbert Scott,” Sir Robert’s face flushed suddenly with anger, in a manner not entirely unlike that of his protege.

He asked me what my interest was in Mr. Scott, and I told him that

he had, until recently, been engaged as my assistant. At this, Robert gave a small laugh of satisfaction, and told me I did not realize exactly how lucky an escape I may have had. I asked again what exactly his training had entailed, and Sir Robert stared at me for a silent minute before he finally nodded his head.

“Balance,” he told me. “Equilibrium. The hardest thing for an architect to achieve. Symmetry is easy, but does not, in and of itself, result in balance. To stir the feelings of man, to create a small place of being divorced from the rest of the world, while still retaining that balance, is the true goal of the architect.”

I had never heard my profession talked off with such conviction and fire before, and I will not lie to you, Jonah: the look in his eyes when he spoke scared me.

Without prompting, his tirade continued, and he began to talk about George, about shortcuts and symmetry, and a patron that the young fool did not understand.

I could follow very little of it, and it seemed to be decidedly removed from anything that I would consider architecture, but whatever it was that Sir Robert had been teaching George, it appeared the lessons had been put to less-noble use than he had intended.

It was at this point that Henry noticed Sir Robert’s agitation from across the room, and came over to gently usher him away to the smoking-room. He sent me a glance of mild reproach as he led his

mentor away, and I was left standing there in the middle of the room, utterly confused, and rather shaken.

I resolved to avoid where possible having anything further to do with George, and continued with my own works. I heard he had set himself up with construction of workhouses according to his own designs. He had taken on a partner by the name of William Bonython Moffatt, a builder's son with no moral character to recommend him of any sort. They vigorously canvassed several district guardians, and managed to acquire several commissions that had previously been mine.

Needless to say, I was rather taken aback by this utter lack of professional etiquette. But I was not without other projects, so I endeavored to ignore it, and leave him to whatever squalid internments he cared to build.

It was in September of '36 that it happened, shortly after George and Moffat had finally opened the first of their workhouses. I didn't realize that was what had happened until afterwards, ensconced as I had been in my own work.

Darkness had fallen, and still I was busy, lit by the reassuring glow of a dozen candles. There was no clock in the workshop, a deliberate choice, to stop the lateness of the hour disturbing me, but I suspect it to been somewhere past midnight when I heard them.

Footsteps. Heavy, thudding footsteps, and the click-clack of a sturdy cane. My assistants had locked all the doors when they left for the

evening, and through the silence of my study, I could not have missed the sound of them opening again. To my dying day, Jonah, I will aver that no one entered the building before I heard the footsteps approach.

As their heavy tread grew closer, and the clack of that cane struck louder, with a quiet malice, I heard another sound beneath them: the jangle of keys.

I have never in all of my life been possessed by such a fear as I was then. The walls and floor seemed to rise towards me, stealing the air from my lungs until I swear that I could feel the splinters from the ceiling digging into the soft skin of my face. I couldn't move as the thudding boot tread came to a halt outside the door, and the cane came to rest with a final clack.

I waited. I waited to have the last vestiges of life squeezed from me by whatever this was. I don't know how much time passed. And then, as though suddenly sloughing off a heavy cloak, the weight fell from me. The room returned to its natural proportions, which is to say, it… never truly changed. I think. It is hard to describe exactly, Jonah, so you will forgive my vagaries.

I rose to my feet and, in a moment of foolhardy bravery that I doubt I shall ever truly understand, I grabbed a candle and ran to the door, flinging it open. I saw a figure walking away, through the door to one of the clerks' offices. It was short and wide, and I could see the wood of the floor bow beneath its huge boots. It wore a tall black hat, and only the thinnest wisps of gray hair were visible

below. In its coarse, ruddy hand it held a hard-worn black cane, tipped with iron.

Then the door closed behind it, and it was gone. I followed into the room behind it, but it was empty. There was no sign of the man, or whatever it was, that had gone in before me. The window was sealed, and there was nowhere for someone of that size to hide. Still, I searched. I wasn't sure what else to do. Even the heavy bootprints seemed to have vanished.

What I did manage to find, however, fallen behind one of the writing desks, was one of George Gilbert Scott's workhouse designs. There is, of course, no way to be certain of any connection between the two events, but that did little to quell the scalding rage in my breast as I strode out of my door the next morning. I took a cab to George's office, where I was informed that he was at his workhouse site with Moffat, and took another cab.

I found the site in a state of some commotion, with my former assistant standing next to a high stone wall, arguing with a labourer, who seemed quite distraught. He was gesturing wildly at an area of the wall, while another man, who I assumed to be Moffat, tried to calm him down.

As I approached, I began to make out what the labourer was saying. He was asking after someone he referred to as "the governor." While Moffat was trying very patiently to explain that no governor had yet been appointed to the workhouse, the labourer didn't seem to be paying this point much mind. However, he kept repeating that

the governor had come to see Harry. He did not say who Harry was, but I assume an acquaintance of his.

He said he knew it was the governor because of the jangle of his keys. He said that the governor had called Harry “idle.” It was at this point I was finally close enough to see the wall he was pointing at with such excitement. At first, I thought they were worms, small and pale against the brickwork. But as I got closer I saw them clearly. Extending from the unblemished solid stone of the workhouse wall were four fingertips.

The labourer repeated it again: the governor had called Harry “idle.”

I returned George’s documents and left.

I trust you will understand now, Jonah, why I have been avoiding the company of my fellows these last few years. I have always been reluctant to make any notation of my story, but now that I finally have everything prepared for my move to New Zealand, I would feel like I had slighted you, had I left without sharing my tale. Do with it as you will; I am done with it.

Sincerely yours,

Sampson Kempthorne.

ARCHIVIST

End statement.

Obviously, trying to trace disappearances and deaths in Victorian workhouses is an exercise in futility, so I'm loathe to even try.

More importantly, who is Robert Smirke? I have read every book I can find on the man, which is, admittedly, not many, and none of them show any sign of this other side to him, apparently at the heart of strange buildings and architecture all over London.

And now what? Students, apprentices? If Henry Roberts was a student of some sort of paranormal construction methods, it doesn't appear to show up in any of his buildings – save perhaps for Fishmongers' Hall, which he designed along with Sir George Gilbert Scott for the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers in 1834. It is reportedly a hotbed for low-key hauntings, but nothing of the magnitude we've heard from others.

Scott is concerning, however. While Smirke seems to have built a handful of notable buildings around London, Sir George Gilbert Scott is responsible for landmarks such as Saint Pancras Station, the Albert Memorial and the restoration of Westminster Abbey. If his buildings have similar quirks, then… let's be honest, I don't know what that would mean. But I doubt it would be good.

That said, there have been no reports of any sort of paranormal or supernatural disturbance in any still-standing building designed by Scott. That should made me feel better, but somehow it doesn't.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

– I, I'm sorry?

TIM

Are you in trouble?

ARCHIVIST

I'm not sure what you mean.

TIM

Well, there was a policewoman asking after you. You know, the one who came to look into Gertrude.

ARCHIVIST

Basira. Where is – when was this?

TIM

Uh, yesterday. You were physical therapy.

ARCHIVIST

Did she say why?

TIM

No. It was a bit weird, really. I've seen her around here a few times before actually. I, um. I don't trust her.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, what?

TIM

Well, I asked if she had anything new to report on Gertrude, and she just said no, and then mumbled a question about when you'd be back. Then she left. It was weird. She's weird.

ARCHIVIST

You don't have a problem with the police, do you, Tim?

TIM

Well, you do know I'm the finest cat burglar in all of Bromley.

ARCHIVIST

Tim.

TIM

Okay, so seriously, I don't get why she keeps coming back 'round here outside of the investigation.

ARCHIVIST

She's, uhhh. I'm, I'm helping her with some of the investigation. Off the record.

TIM

Oh.

Ohhh.

Say no more!

ARCHIVIST

Tim, wh-what are you –

TIM

Don't worry, I'm cool. Good work, boss.

ARCHIVIST

Oh! No, Tim, that's not what I – it's really not like that –

TIM

[speaking over him] I'll go see if I can dig anything else out on Scott, and I'll let you know if she comes back.

[DOOR CLOSES]

ARCHIVIST

That really isn't what –

[sigh] End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG051 – High Pressure

Statement #0080701

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Antonia Haley, regarding a deep dive that took place near Sable Island, Nova Scotia in August 2006. Original statement given January 7th, 2008. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I should be dead, really. It's a weird feeling. You ever had a near-death experience? I've had a few. They're not uncommon in my line of work, but this… it feels different. It's not that I put myself in danger and managed not to die – I *should* be dead. Decompression sickness that severe is almost never survivable, and I should have had an embolism. The fact that I didn't? Blind luck. It's hard to reconcile yourself with avoiding a death that you feel should have been yours. If there'd been others with me who didn't make it, if I could write it off as survivor's guilt, but… I was alone.

Do you ever get that? Of course you don't, sorry.

Anyway, I'm not here to talk about the bends. I'm a diver, both by nature and by trade. I grew up in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and was swimming almost before I was walking. I did my first scuba dive at eight years old. It was barely deeper than a swimming pool, but it was enough to instill a lifelong passion for it. I got fully qualified as soon as I was legally able, and almost flunked out of college because I was always running off to some dive or other. I must have missed more classes than I went to by the end. I scraped by, but as it turned out, even if I hadn't, it wouldn't have mattered too much, as it wasn't my psychology major that got me my first job after graduation. It was diving.

I worked at a marine salvage company based off the coast of Nova Scotia. You'll forgive me if I don't give their name; I still hold out hope I might go back to work there someday, and I'd feel like an asshole dragging their name through the mud, even if it is just to you and your "strict confidentiality procedures." If you're desperate, they shouldn't be hard to identify, but it's not really relevant to what happened.

You ever heard of "the Graveyard of the Atlantic?" Probably not, and it's a confusing name anyway, since it actually refers to two distinct locations along the eastern coast of North America, both notorious hotspots for shipwrecks. In this case, I'm talking about the one off Sable Island, in Nova Scotia. The waters there are some of the roughest, where the Gulf Stream hits the Labrador Current, and depending on which historical records you believe, there could be anything from four- to six-hundred shipwrecks down there. And

that's only from when the European settlers first arrived.

Normally, it's not the sort of place where we would accept jobs. It's too dangerous to send a salvage crew in when the water's that unpredictable. But this time was different. Maybe the old man was just a real sweet talker – or maybe he swept the captain, a leathery old cuss by the name of Morten Kemp, just enough extra under the table that he fudged the location on the release forms. Either way, word came down that we were doing a dive off Sable Island.

None of that was to say the captain was stupid about it. We kept a very close eye on the meteorological reports, and only headed into the Graveyard when we were certain we'd have a window of relatively calm seas to do it. It helped that the job was relatively simple. The old man, Simon Fairchild, had come to us claiming that he had pinpointed the location he believed his great-grandfather's sailing yacht had been sunk almost a hundred and twenty years ago, and he was keen to retrieve any heirlooms or curios he could from it. The only thing interesting or unusual about his story was the amount of money he was willing to throw around to back it up. It was certainly enough to get us dropping anchor a hundred miles from the coast on a hot sunny morning at the end of August.

The journey out had been a bit subdued. Normally, me and Julio Hernandez, the other diver on the crew, would spend our time chatting, playing cards, and once even screwing, though we generally don't talk about that. This time, we had to babysit Mr. Fairchild, who had stubbornly insisted that he make the journey with us.

Again, this wouldn't normally have been an option, but the guy was not shy about throwing his money around. He must have been pushing a hundred years old, just a tiny pink skeleton of a man, sat in the corner watching us the whole trip. It was hard to get any sort of friendly chat going with him perched there like some sort of vulture. I tried to talk to him a few times, but he only seemed interested in discussing this shipwreck and how preserved I thought everything might be. I told him I had no idea, as it really wasn't my area – I was just the diver. He didn't say much to me after that.

When we hit the graveyard, the sea was almost completely still, far more so than I would have expected, even given the weather predictions we'd been working on. It didn't strike me as odd at the time, just an unexpected bit of help with the job. Initial checks managed to locate a wreck that seemed to match the old man's description, a steam yacht circa 1890. It seemed to be in surprisingly good shape, and, in the camera's torchlight, we could just about make out the name: the *Maria Fairchild.* The old man was practically dancing with joy, and I was genuinely concerned he might give himself a heart attack.

We suited up and prepared to go under. The wreck was at a depth of a hundred and sixty feet, which meant we'd be in a high-pressure environment, but we shouldn't need hypoxic gas or full-pressure suits, which was something of a relief. Julio made his prayers, Captain Kemp gave us a stern nod, and into the water we went.

As I went in I thought I heard Simon, the old man, shout after me, but I couldn't make it out.

And then the world was nothing but silent blue. I had expected the water to be warmer, given the temperature on the surface, but the chill hit me all at once, and it took a moment to get to grips with it. I saw Julio next to me, a few yards away, and with a thumbs up we began to dive down towards the sunken boat.

Most people don't appreciate how quickly it gets dark underwater. You don't need to be nearly as deep as you think before the sun is just the faintest change in the water hues. If you're not careful, it's easy to forget which way is up, and become lost in the murky depths. But Julio and I were a well-practiced team, and we weren't going so far down us to face any darkness that our torches couldn't handle.

It was during that descent, when I saw that our two points of light were the only signs of movement down there, that I noticed the absence of life. I wasn't *particularly* worried by this – if anything I was rather relieved. Anyone who's been diving more than a few years will be able to tell you of at least one close call with a shark, and I'd had two so far, so the less movement the better, as far as I was concerned. Still, it was a surprise that we haven't seen even a single school of fish on our journey to the sea floor, and once we were down there it was just as lifeless. I gestured my confusion to Julio, but he just shrugged, and started over towards the wreck.

Down there, deep below the surface, I find myself sometimes entering an almost… meditative state. You can feel the weight of the world, a world you were never meant to be part of, pressing in on you from all directions; and the constant overpowering

awareness of your own breathing, of how little there is between you and the very space around you that is completely hostile to your existence. The danger is real, as is the faint, hardened fear in your gut, but I've always found that it sometimes put me in a state not too unlike how it feels staring into the flames of a fire – hypnotic. My mind cleared of all thoughts but the dull, pulsing rush of adrenaline.

That feeling was so strong here that I almost swam past the *Maria Fairchild* completely. Julio was already inside, and I quickly located a large enough tear in the hull and made my own entrance. The yacht was bigger than I had thought when viewing it from the boat, but the layout was not complicated, and we already had quite a good idea about where would be best to look for the sort of antiques and sentimental treasures that Simon wanted. Julio had taken the bedroom, so I started on the bridge.

It was certainly an impressive sight – a late 19th century steam yacht, slightly decayed from its time on the ocean floor but, all-in-all, astoundingly well-preserved. I looked over the chair and the various panels and controls, but could find nothing which could be classed as an easily-removable heirloom – although I did make a mental note of which bits of the bridge were well-enough preserved they might be worth removing. It would need more equipment than we had with us, but I could suggest it to Simon if we returned empty-handed.

I checked in on Julio, but he was still busy ransacking the bedroom, so I decided to do a sweep at the engine room. It was there I found

the hole.

It was large, maybe seven feet in diameter, not unlike the one I had used to get into the wreck in the first place. There was something about it that immediately put me on edge. The shape was too regular somehow, the water outside it was… too dark. And it took me a few seconds to notice this, but the direction of the tearing seemed to indicate it had been made from the inside out.

I dropped the rusted wrench I had been examining and let it float slowly towards the floor as I made my way to the hole. I gripped to the side, and looked through.

As soon as I put my head through, I felt a change wash over me. The pressure increased all at once, becoming so intense that I screamed in surprise and pain, as my head erupted in agony. The pressure was upon my whole body now, and I was finding it hard to move with the crushing weight on every part of me. My eyes bulged as I stared forward, and I saw two things.

The first was that below the hole there was no seafloor, just a deep and endless expanse of empty water, as though the boat were on a cliff edge.

The second was that it was far, far too dark. The deepest that humans can survive in the ocean is the mesopelagic zone, which begins roughly six hundred and fifty feet below the surface. It is colloquially known, among oceanographers, as the Twilight Zone, as it is the level where only the faintest of light penetrates from the

sun, and the water can only be seen in the many shades of darkness. Down that far, any glow that makes it is so diffused as to be utterly useless in determining which way is up. But as I stared out in terror, I was absolutely sure that there *was* no up. That I could swim as far as I liked – there would never be anything but water.

Then I saw it.

It was only a shadow in the dark, but it was *there.* And it was *huge.* It stretched from one side of my vision to the other, and as I fought against the pressure to turn my aching head, I still couldn't see the end of it. Only its blurred outline was slightly better-contrasted against the lighter shade of the twilight water that surrounded it.

I could not see the ends of it. It was so big it made me lightheaded to think about it, to try and place myself in some believable scale against it.

I think it was a hand, but I could not see enough to be sure. Then it moved, slowly but clearly, and I realized how far away it still was, as it got bigger and bigger and bigger, and I could see nothing else, and I screamed.

It was the jagged metal of the hole itself that saved me in the end. As I cried out in horror, I felt the sharp edges of it digging into my hands as they gripped it, and the unexpected burst of pain snapped me out of whatever it was that held me in place. With a surge of strength, I pushed myself back into the boat, and I felt the pressure lift all at once.

Of course, this brought its own set of problems, but I didn't care. The lightheadedness was already setting in, and my vision was blurry when I swam out of the sunken ship and headed towards the surface at full speed, ignoring all decompression procedures. I blacked out thirty feet from the surface.

I have vague memories of the trip back: fading in and out of consciousness, feeling the worst I have ever felt in my life. Then I recall a helicopter, shouting, and finally waking up fully in a hospital bed. Captain Kemp was there, and he immediately laid into me, calling me all sorts of horrendous names before informing me exactly how serious my condition had been, and how lucky I was to be alive. I should be dead, he told me. And I know he was right.

I left the company soon afterwards. I still plan to go back someday, but it'll be a while longer before I'm comfortable in the water again.

Julio never came to visit me in-hospital, and I was unable to get in contact with him after I was discharged. I hope he's all right.

I did ask Captain Kemp what happened to the job after I left, as I also hadn't seen the old man since that morning. The captain got a strange look in his eyes then, and gazed out of the window with a scowl I had never seen on his face before.

"The sea is a dangerous place," he said, and walked away.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

No real follow-up can be made to this statement, as it all took place in Canadian territory. We don't have the contacts over there that we do here. Not to mention that what little I could glean appears to be a mass of overlapping and conflicting police, coast guard, and port authority reports. We could spend years trying to unravel this one case, if we had a mind to – and I for one do not.

We weren't even able to glean sufficient information to track down any of those mentioned in the statement aside from Captain Morten Kemp, who now runs boat tours near Winnipeg, and declined to comment on it in the strongest possible terms.

Instead, I will focus on Simon Fairchild, who I recall may have come up in Case 0022010, along with a young woman. I may have encountered Fairchild before, or it may just be a coincidence of names. One of my first cases as a researcher for the Institute in 2012 was looking into the history of a jewelers' in Hackney that had reported cases becoming cracked in the night. Nothing was ever taken, but each morning it would be like a heavy weight had been dropped upon them. Looking into it, it turned out that the jewels had, in the 1930s, belonged to a con artist and fence who had attracted the displeasure of the local population. When one particularly irate customer threw him out of a fourth floor window into a crowded street at midday, no one claimed to have seen anything.

A minor possible haunting, with a decidedly pedestrian backstory, but notable because, while I was never able to discover the original name of the con artist, one of his many, many aliases was Simon

Fairchild, and it appeared on several business listings around the time.

Whether it's a coincidence or not is something of a moot point at this stage, however. A cursory bit of research reveals the Fairchilds in question to be an exceptionally wealthy family based down in Cornwall. No real business to speak of, but it appears they've invested very wisely in aerospace technology, shipping logistics, and underwater drilling and construction.

Whatever their origin, I feel it's worth keeping an eye on them.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

I had a strange conversation with Sasha earlier today. I have been… doing some research into her, but there's little to go on, save that she worked in Artefact Storage.

I decided to pay it a short visit to acquaint myself with any new acquisitions. Not much worth reporting, really: a new oak wardrobe that light is apparently unable to penetrate; a carved rock eye they

keep in a black velvet bag – apparently it interferes with the video cameras otherwise – and a rather nasty-looking scalpel that is supposedly rife with the disease no matter what they used to sterilize or disinfect it. That one's kept in a hermetically sealed plastic box.

I stumbled across Sasha staring at that damn table again. Luckily, I had the wherewithal to bring my tape recorder, and managed to turn it on unnoticed.

Recording follows.

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

[recorded] It's… fascinating, isn't it? In the literal sense, I mean.

NOT!SASHA

[recorded] Yes. Sometimes I – can't pull myself away from it.

ARCHIVIST

Given recent events, I… I've been trying to figure out if it's a fractal.

NOT!SASHA

No… no, it isn't, I've always seen it more… like a web?

ARCHIVIST

– I, I guess it has caught us, in its own way.

NOT!SASHA

I don't think we're the first to be caught.

ARCHIVIST

No?

NOT!SASHA

I believe it caught Graham as well.

ARCHIVIST

I thought that was… I… whatever crawled through his window. Unless you think they're linked, somehow?

NOT!SASHA

I doubt it. It didn't sound like the sort of thing that would want to be bound to an object.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose. And we haven't seen any long-limbed stalkers, so… let's concentrate on the table.

NOT!SASHA

Agreed. If you'll excuse me?

ARCHIVIST

Of course.

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Odd, but not alarming, though I think I may discuss restricting her access to the table with Elias.

Oh – and I found out where she's been going when she takes extra-long lunch breaks. It seems harmless enough, but I admit I am a bit baffled. Every few days, she travels up to Baker Street, to spend anywhere from ten minutes to a full hour in Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum.

End supplement.

[CLICK]

MAG052 – Exceptional Risk

Statement #0040904

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Philip Brown, regarding his time working at HMP Wakefield between 1990 and 2002. Original statement given April 9, 2004. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, head archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

How much do you know about the prison service?

Not much, I'd bet.

Maybe you've seen a few prison movies, think you know a bit about how it is in there. You've got to keep face and watch your back, right? After all, you never know who's got a shiv with your name on it.

Well for a start, you're probably thinking of American movies about American prisons, and I can't speak to that. Maybe it *is* non-stop gang warfare over there. But in my experience, the biggest danger in a prison is, and always will be, boredom.

I say that like it's some glib observation, but we work hard to keep

it as boring as possible. The first hint of violence among the inmates gets smacked down. I worked as a prison officer in Her Majesty's Prison Wakefield, or "The Monster Mansion", as the press insists on calling it. It houses the real scum of this country. Class-A dangers, the lot of them, and it was always a point of pride to me that we kept that place quiet.

I mean, I say it like I had any real power, but I was just a grunt keeping an eye on a cage full of wild animals. I won't even pretend I was proportional in my use of force. I mean, Prison Inspector would have been over that with me already, but the sort of things you have to have done to end up in Wakefield – well.

Let's just say the suicide attempts far outnumbered the murder attempts. And I never lost any sleep over that fact. Not at any of the inmates, I made sure of that.

After lockup at 7:00 p.m. sharp, I made a point of keeping my wing dark and quiet. It helped that they were single cells, of course – no worries about conversational violence between cellmates. But even then, I was careful to make it very clear that drawing my attention after lights-out was something they would regret. I'll admit, I was a real bastard when I worked there. Sometimes you need a bastard to keep an eye on the monsters. And back then, I really thought that the murderous filth we were looking after were the closest thing this world had to real monsters.

I was wrong, of course.

I'd been working there for almost five years when Robert Montauk came to us. Now, don't get me wrong, we've had plenty of celebrity criminals passed through Wakefield over the years, but I can't say it didn't give me a slight chill to know that we were going to be keeping watch over the most prolific British serial killer of all time. I mean, he killed forty people, that's a ridiculous number. I mean, maybe not in America, where you have so many places to hide, but his nearest competition in this country barely reached half that, and he used to be a policeman. All told, you had the ingredients for a cocktail of posturing, unrest, and violence among certain quarters of the inmates. He wouldn't normally have gone to Wakefield, as his crimes had no sexual element to them, but we were the only ones that had space for a prisoner needing that level of security and scrutiny.

He was a big guy. I wasn't expecting that, to be honest. Usually, with that kind of prisoner, they've got your "you'd never know, to look at them" sort of feeling, but Montauk looked like a killer. He must have been almost six foot six and built like a barge. His dark hair was cropped close to his scalp, showing off a flat, angular face. Not to put too fine a point on it, but the man was terrifying. When he entered the rec room for the first time, I could almost hear the deflating egos as a dozen would-be hoodlums thought better of trying to make a reputation by standing up to Robert Montauk.

Of course, there's always one, and in this case, it was Ivan Ilich, an aspiring Serbian gangster who decided to go after him, jumping him from the side. Me and the other wardens had been waiting for

something like this, but we were too slow to get there in time. Well, maybe we could have gone faster, but forty murders… sometimes you want a look at what you're up against.

Ilich was not a small man, and nearly matched Montauk in height, if not in weight, but there was an energy to Montauk – a tightness, like a rubber band about to snap. Ilich leapt forward with a shout and delivered a solid punch right into the other man's kidneys, but it was as though he'd hit the pressure pad on a bear trap. With terrifying speed the hands snapped round, gripping the Serbian's right arm.

There was a half moment of complete silence as everyone seemed to be holding their breath to see what Robert Montauk did next. He brought his hands around with a violent twist, cleanly dislocating his assailant's arm with a nasty pop, replacing the silence with a scream and a string of Slavic curse words. At this point, me and the other screws broke it up. I got the unenviable task of taking the still-cursing Ivan Ilich own to get his arm treated.

I didn't see Montauk again for some time. After that little incident, he was immediately transferred over to F-block, where he wasn't going to be a danger to anyone but himself. I'd occasionally hear rumors about him filtering through the other inmates, and there wasn't a spooky story in Wakefield that didn't have him at the center of it. Barely a week went by without some loudmouth nobody spreading word that he'd killed the guard, or escaped, or been found dead in his cell with his heart ripped out. It was never true, of course. Not at that point. I think most of it came from Dave

Harrington on F-wing. He always loved to drop the fake gossip on new inmates, and the old hands knew not to trust a word he said.

It was 1998 when –

[DOOR OPENS]

ARCHIVIST

Hello?

BASIRA

Hey, I just wanted to –

ARCHIVIST

Oh, hold on.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, can't be too careful. Accidentally mentioned you won one of my earlier official recordings, and had to go back over it.

BASIRA

Oh, sure. I've got another tape for you.

ARCHIVIST

Fantastic. Here's the other one.

BASIRA

Was there anything on it?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, very much so. A Russian circus that – oh. But, uh, nothing relevant to Gertrude's murder if that's what you mean.

BASIRA

That is what I mean.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Sorry.

Have you had a chance to listen to any of them yourself?

BASIRA

Well the precinct has exactly one tape player, and it exploded when I tried to put batteries in it. Put in a requisition for a new one, but that's lost somewhere in the Met, and I haven't had a chance to chase it up, so no.

ARCHIVIST

Well, if you keep bringing them to me –

BASIRA

It's better than nothing, yeah. Anyway, I thought you could try this one next.

ARCHIVIST

Alexandria?

BASIRA

Hey, at least this one actually has a label. I figured you're probably into old libraries and stuff –

ARCHIVIST

No, you're right. Thank you, Basira. Honest.

BASIRA

Yeah. Oh, what's the name of that helper of yours?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, Martin.

BASIRA

No, no – the hot one. He has scars like you, but kind of manages to pull them off –

ARCHIVIST

Yes, *Tim*.

BASIRA

Yeah, what's his deal? He gave me the weirdest grin when I came in just now and like… the thumbs up?

ARCHIVIST

I… I wouldn't worry about it.

BASIRA

No?

ARCHIVIST

[sigh] …he thinks we're sort of… together?

BASIRA

Oh – Oh. Oh, no. You know I'm no –

ARCHIVIST

Yeah I know, me neither, he just got it in his head –

BASIRA

– I mean you're nice and all –

ARCHIVIST

– yes – yes, no, I feel the same way.

BASIRA

Right. I mean, I suppose it's better he think that?

ARCHIVIST

[sigh] I won't tell if you want.

BASIRA

Right. I'm… gonna go then.

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Yes.

[DOOR SHUTS]

Right. *[clears throat]* Statement resumes.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

It was in 1998 that I next came into regular contact with Robert Montauk. The government had commissioned the construction of Close Supervision Centers in prisons all over the country, and Wakefield was one of the flagship initiatives. A good portion of F-wing was given over to our own CSC, soon to be known as the Exceptional Risk Unit. It could only hold eight prisoners, but they were to be the worst of the worst, kept under constant scrutiny and given no chance to harm anyone.

I was picked to be one of the officers transferred into the new unit. I don't know if it was specifically because I had more inmate

altercations on my record than any other prison officer at Wakefield, but given the intensity of the setup, I'm sure it didn't hurt my application.

Robert Montauk was an obvious choice for the Exceptional Risk Unit. During his time in Wakefield, he had been involved in several further violent incidents, and though he hadn't yet killed anyone inside the prison, the higher-ups reckoned it was only a matter of time, so in he went.

The CSC was not a nice place. Wakefield had had the budget to make it secure, but not to make it anything less than starkly-utilitarian. The individual cells were cramped and claustrophobic, with almost no natural light filtering in from the outside. Oh, they still got their exercise, but it was in bare metal cages.

We kept them separated from each other almost as much as we kept them from the rest of the prison. You must never underestimate how violent and desperate a trapped animal can become.

We were cruel to them – I'm not ashamed of that. If I were to tell you all the crimes of those monsters we kept in the ERU, you'd probably lose your lunch before I was halfway through the list. Keeping them beat down was the only way to make sure they behaved. And besides, atonement is important.

I'll admit though, I always had a soft spot for Robert Montauk. He never gave us any trouble. Away from the other prisoners he seemed too docile, almost eerily so sometimes.

Also – and it's a small thing – but he never denied his crimes. Wakefield is one of those prisons where everyone is innocent, and it gets so dull to hear their whining protestations day after day. Anyone who fully owned their crimes always went up in my estimation. I mean, we still beat him down on occasion, but not as bad as the others. After a year or two, I kind of started to forget who he was, you know? The mystique of being Britain's most successful serial killer just didn't hold up when you have someone in your power like that. You forget any respect you might have had for them. And he never gave us any trouble.

In 2001 he started to get visitors – his daughter, mostly. Given that she hadn't visited before, I'd guess she'd just turned 18. You get that a lot. Unaccompanied visits aren't allowed under that age, and plenty of inmates have kids living with overprotective guardians who refused to take them. So I assumed she was similar.

The visitor rooms in the main prison are quite nice – not so much in the Exceptional Risk Unit. The dark, bare room, like all of them, cut down the middle with a reinforced window. There were plenty of lights in there, but somehow it always seemed gloomy. I was on observation for a few of their father-daughter visits. She would talk about her life like her dad wasn't a murderer, he would lie about how it wasn't too bad in the prison. It was all very touching, I'm sure.

Aside from his daughter, there was only one other time that he had a visitor. It was six months before he died, late March 2002. He was an older guy, I'd guess late fifties, wearing a well-tailored black suit

and an expression of disgust. When I brought Montauk in, his face fell and he went very pale. I'd helped folks beat Robert Montauk a dozen times or more, but I had never seen him look scared.

He sat down opposite the old man, and they looked each other in the eye through the thick glass. I think the visitor might have been blind. His eyes were cloudy, but he had no cane or dog, and it didn't seem to affect how he looked at Montauk.

Neither of them spoke.

The seconds turned into minutes and still they didn't say a word. They just sat there, staring. Given where I work, it's really something to be able to say that I've never seen two people who hated each other as much as Robert Montauk and that old man.

After a few minutes, I was all but ready to drag him out, but as I stepped forward, the lights blew, all of them at once, leaving us in the dark.

I heard Pete Gordo, the warden with me on visitor duty, fumbling for the handle on the door, to get help or torches.

I was tense, ready to fight off Montauk if he decided to make a move, but instead a soft voice came from out of the darkness. I didn't recognize it, but I thought it sounded like it came from the old man. I don't think he was talking to me.

"You didn't think you could kill it for long, did you?"

That's what it said.

Then Pete got the door open, and a shaft of light poured in from the corridor.

I could once again see Montauk and the old man, sat there, motionless. It didn't seem like they'd moved an inch. Though, as I went to take Montauk back to his cell, I noticed that he was crying. I didn't mention it. I'll be honest, I was kind of freaked out by the whole thing.

The next few months were quiet. Montauk seemed even more subdued than normal, and often had to be goaded into exercising during his allotted time. The only point where he seemed normal was when his daughter came for her visits, and maybe that was just because he was already so used to lying to her.

That was the summer we had all the plumbing problems in the ERU, and the water kept going foul, so we were all kind of on edge. But nothing really happened until it turned to autumn and November rolled around. It was November the 1st. I remember because the date was read out so many damn times at the assorted disciplinaries that followed.

The worst part of it is, I wasn't even doing anything wrong that day. I was working the late shift with Pete, and we were having coffee in the break room. At least, *I* was having coffee. Pete was swearing at the taps, because the plumbing problem we had all had been assured was fixed was back and worse than ever. The taps were disgorging a jet of foul-smelling, stagnant water. I was laughing at him, sipping my own perfectly adequate drink, when all the lights

went off.

It was more widespread than last time, though. It seemed like the electricity had gone off altogether. We stood there in the pitch-black, waiting for the generator to kick in, or for whatever power problem this was to be fixed. But after a few minutes of silence and darkness, it became clear that that wasn't happening anytime soon.

In the distance, we could hear the prisoners of the Exceptional Risk Unit start to shout and holler. Their cells were locked, of course – there was nothing a power cut could do about that. But it was still up to us to keep order until the lights came back.

I had hoped that the other prison officers on shift would have come by to pick us up, but they were clearly busy elsewhere. I called out to Pete, making sure he was still nearby as I fumbled in the locker for my torch. I finally found it and turned it on. The beam was so bright in the oppressive darkness that I had to blink away tears. Using the light from mine, Pete found his own flashlight, and together we headed out into the CSC.

We checked each cell in turn, lying to the prisoners inside about when the power would be back and sending them back to their beds with threats of violence. I didn't see any of the other wardens around, and was starting to get really nervous. When we had checked all the other cells, we went towards Robert Montauk's.

The torch beams shot out in front of us, but as they fell upon the door to his cell, something was wrong. I wasn't quite sure what I

was looking at for a second, and then I realized that his cell door was open, but the torch light wasn't reaching the inside. As it hit the threshold, it just stopped, a clear and distinct line of darkness beyond which nothing could be seen.

From inside there came the wet sound of tearing and a low moan of pain.

I wanted to run, but instead I took a step forward. My torch died. Pete's went off as well, and we just stood there, terrified, unable to see a thing. The sounds were no longer coming from inside the cell, and that didn't really as much as it might have.

About fifteen feet behind me, I heard Pete fumbling around, calling out my name. I was about to reply, tell him to stay where he was, when I heard something that froze my blood.

Pete said, "There you are." He was not touching me.

Almost immediately, there was a growl from the darkness. It was throaty in a roar, but at the same time sounded almost musical. He screamed. I heard him fall to the floor.

It was at that moment that the lights came back on. We were alone.

I ran to do a quick circuit of the CSC that the other prison officers arrived, but there was no one else there. Apparently, there'd been some problems with the doors, and they hadn't been able to get to the main ERU cells. Pete was on the ground when I returned, though he seemed physically unharmed. It was one of the other

wardens that found what was left of Robert Montauk.

I took the fall for it. They didn't try to make out like I had killed him, just that it had happened on my watch and due to my negligence. They'd been trying to push me out ever since the Prison Inspector had written the CSC up for excessive use of force the year before. They really threw the book at me. "Gross incompetence." It's a bitter phrase to say out loud. What was I supposed to tell them, a monster made of darkness murdered him?

Pete was no help. He handed in his notice two hours after the lights came back on. I didn't even get a chance to speak to him, ask what had happened – he was just gone.

I don't really have anything more to say about it. It was a clearly-paranormal incident that led to the end of my career and it's not fair.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Prison records are very hard to acquire for the Close Supervision Center, due to the small number of inmates held there. Most information could be considered "identifying," so the prison service tends to hide behind data protection laws when asked about them. Beyond that, many of the prison records from before the mid-2000s have still not been digitized, making followup on this hard.

Tim hit something of a dead end trying to look up Pete Gordo,

though Sasha did manage to track down the 2002 visitor logs for the whole of Wakefield prison. It took some searching, but I managed to find what I believe to be the entry for the visit from Mr. Brown's mysterious old man. The name given is "Maxwell Rayner."

Martin hasn't had much luck tracking down Mr. Brown himself. According to Caroline Brodie, his ex-wife, she left him in 2004 after his dismissal from the prison service pushed him further into alcoholism and he became abusive. She says she got a single letter from him in 2009, asking for reconciliation, but she never replied. Martin says the letter was postmarked from Waterford in Ireland, but he's been unable to track Mr. Brown any further.

So, what is this thing, if it seems to obstruct Robert Montauk through so much of his life, and what's its connection to Rayner? Were they summoning it, containing it, worshipping it? Whatever the case, it seems as though Montauk earned its anger.

I feel it might be worthwhile getting a few more torches for the Archive.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

I confronted Sasha about the wax museum. It was just too strange to not mention. I tried to pass it off like I had spotted her accidentally while in the area for other reasons. I doubt she bought it, but she did at least give me an answer. She has a new boyfriend, or so she claims, who works there, and she likes to get lunch with him. It is plausible, and at this stage I feel challenging her to produce said boyfriend would potentially damage what trust remains between us.

No luck with any of my other leads yet, but at least I have another of Gertrude's tapes. It's always going to be a shot in the dark with them, but hopefully an informative one. I know the secret to her death is on one of them. It must be.

I just… I hope I don't have to hear it firsthand.

End supplement.

[CLICK]

MAG053 – Crusader

Statement #9970509

[CLICK]

GERTRUDE

Are you quite recovered?

WALTER

Yes, I, I think so. Well enough to tell my story, at least.

GERTRUDE

Oh, good.

Sergeant Walter Heller recording, regarding a discovery made near Alexandria during Operation Crusader in November of 1941. Recording date 5th of September, 1997.

Anytime you're ready.

WALTER

Right. Where do you want me to start?

GERTRUDE

Well, you say you were serving in North Africa when it happened?

WALTER

Yes, I was with the Second Royal Gloucestershire Hussars. We weren't even meant to be down in Libya, originally, but when the pushback against Rommel started, the whole brigade was reassigned. We were going to help with Operation Crusader. Well, that was fine by me, my brother Frances had died at Arras when the Germans had pushed through the year before. Rommel has been in command there, as well, and I hated him for it. I knew I'd never get to do anything about it, but I always used to carry an old picture of him I'd clipped from the newspaper, and I made sure to keep it in my pack so I'd know him if ever I saw him again, or just in case.

Well, there were four of us on the tank crew: Frank Malloy was in command, Ralph McCulloch did the driving, and we had a loader by the name of Dicky. I, well, I'm afraid I don't remember his second name; he wasn't with us very long. I was the gunner. I've always had good eyes, you see, and you really need that for the gun. It's all very well for Frank to point at a speck on horizon and give us the order to fire, but I'm the one that needs to line up the shot close to a mile away, and turn a Nazi tank into a smouldering brick before they can do the same to us.

I was good at it. Though I managed to get three M13/40s when the fighting started. I would have liked to have a crack at the Panzer, but it was the Italians who caught up with us at Bir el Gubi, so I never had a chance. Maybe it was just as well, by all accounts, the Germans had a lot more training, so maybe it would have gone even worse for us. But I still hated having to waste time on the

Italians, when I knew Rommel and his Panzers were out there in the desert somewhere.

It was all a bit of a mess, to be honest, that battle. Our air support were meant to have bombed their airfields to rubble, but weather had kept them grounded, so we were hounded by German planes the whole time. The Italians had unsurprisingly taken a page out of Rommel's handbook, and they backed up their tanks with heavier infantry support, while we were left almost entirely on our own.

Frank took to the machine-gun when he could keep it pinned down, but it was hard enough to keep our eyes on the enemy tanks without constantly having to worry about a Panzerfaust coming out of you from nowhere. We were still in the Crusader Mark 1s back then, so we had the speed to keep ahead of them, but I was basically useless when we were driving. Any time we stopped long enough for me to get an eye on an Italian tank, we ended up a sitting duck for their infantry. All told, I think taking down three of them was a pretty good effort.

You know, it was hot that day. I hadn't been in the desert more than a couple of weeks by then, and the sheer heat of the place was still something of a shock. I'm from Cheltenham, you see, so not exactly used to the blazing sun of a Libyan desert. And a Crusader – well, for all its advantages, it didn't have very much in the way of ventilation, so we were spending a lot of time trapped in what was more or less a mobile oven. Even then, I could just about stand it, but once the fighting got going and the guns started firing, well. It was only a 2-pounder, but still, the heat was almost unbearable.

It was about two hours into the battle that it happened. The gun was now so hot I couldn't touch it, and I was having to wipe a steady stream of sweat from my eyes every few seconds. The whole desert seemed to swell and sway in the heat haze, but I clearly heard Frank call an order to fire on a tank from the east.

Ralph brought the Crusader to a stop, and I heard poor Dicky call from inside that we were clear to fire, swearing all the time over his burnt fingers. I could see the dark shape of an Italian gun in the distance, and was trying to get the angle right, but my vision was so hazy from the intense heat that it was hard to focus my binoculars properly.

Then I saw it: a flash of light, a twinkling glint of sun from the enemy tank. In the back of my mind, I knew what it meant: the sun reflecting off their own binoculars, which were trained on us, but my head was so foggy that for all the world it seemed as though they were winking at me. I tried to say something to the rest of the crew, but my mouth was too dry, and all that came out was a dull croak. It was strange, but even with the intense sunlight reflecting off that endless expanse of bright desert, I still remember seeing the flash of their gun. I didn't hear it, though. They always say that don't they? That you never hear the shot that gets you. Well, I certainly didn't.

Then I was on the ground with Frank and Ralph standing over me. Ralph was trying to say something, but I couldn't hear it over the intense ringing in my ears. There was the smell of burning metal, and below it, another scent I couldn't quite place. I tried to sit up,

but there was such an intense shooting pain in my left leg as I did so that did I collapsed again.

A few yards away I could hear our Crusader, smoke pouring from the cracked armor. It surprised me how intact she seemed, until I saw the flames creeping up from the hatch. It was then the ringing in my ears faded enough for me to hear it: the screaming from inside the tank. Dicky was still in there. I looked at my companions, and saw in their faces that they heard it too. There was nothing they could have done to save the poor fool, of course. If, if they had trapped him in there, then, then getting to him would have been impossible, and trying would only have got them killed. So I had to lie there and listen to Dicky roast to death. I don't know how long it took, but it felt like hours.

At some point, there must have been a retreat ordered, as I saw the rest of the Crusaders pulling back. Frank managed to catch the attention of one of them, and the commander agreed to take me back somewhere the medics could get a look at my leg, although there wasn't room for us all, so they literally strapped me to the top of the tank, and we drove off, leaving Ralph and Frank to make their own way back.

It wasn't until I tracked Ralph down almost 10 years later that I found they had been captured soon afterwards, and spent the rest of the war in an Italian POW camp. Oh, the way they described it, it had been quite comfortable, but as far as I knew at the time, we were leaving them to their death. If, if I hadn't been so delirious in the heat and pain, I might have cried. My memory of the trip back

is fragmented, and I have only faint impressions of the pain which every vibration of the tank's engines sent through my injured leg as I passed in and out of consciousness.

Then there was stillness; shouting. I remember a faint prick in my arm, and then a different sort of haze settled over my mind as numbness and sleep spread through my veins. The next thing I recall with any clarity is my hospital bed. I'd been taken over the border, back to Egypt, and had ended up in the British military hospital in Alexandria. When I awoke, it was so quiet that for a minute I had the sudden, panicked thought that I might be deaf. But it was just that after 70 days of hearing the roar of one engine or another, the peace of an almost empty hospital was so deep and serene that I couldn't understand it.

When she came round, the nurse was kind enough to inform me that I was one of the first wounded to have returned from Bir el Gubi, but they expected more. Sure enough, over the next few days the ward filled up and my peace slipped away beneath the steady stream of injured soldiers. I didn't mind too much, as it was still a damn sight better than rolling over the boiling desert in an iron coffin. Not to mention the fact that it turned out I wasn't going to lose the leg, which is the sort of news to put you in a very good mood. The doctors told me I'd probably always have a limp, as I'm sure you've noticed, but it wasn't infected, and there wasn't the nerve damage they had been afraid of, so all told it was a pretty good wound to get.

After a few weeks, I was walking on without too much pain, and

the nurses advised me to start taking the occasional walk around Alexandria. I did so, but between the locals and the army, it was a crowded noisy place, even at night. I took to taking my walks further and further from the hospital and the city centre, and occasionally I'd find myself wondering some way beyond the city limits – at least, as far as my leg would allow. It was still hot, even in late December, but beyond the edge of the city there was a peaceful quiet that I just couldn't find anywhere else.

It was two days before I was due to return to active duty that it happened. I'd been restless all week, and I couldn't seem to settle down or focus on anything. Once I got out near Pompey's Pillar, the crowd seemed to disperse and my mind finally cleared a bit.

I kept walking, though not paying any real attention to my surroundings, until I found myself rather lost. After several hours my leg was starting to ache badly and I took a moment or two to rest against a nearby door. The wood of the door was old and dry, and creaked as I put my weight against it. I didn't even notice it buckling 'till it was too late. The next thing I knew I was lying face down a dingy basement, my leg screaming in fresh pain.

It wasn't broken again, which was a relief, but I still had to sit there for a while recovering from my fall. And nobody seemed to have noticed what had happened, or at least they didn't care, and I took a few moments to look exactly where I was.

The basement looked old, really old. I'm not an expert on Egyptian architecture, but it didn't look much like the rest of Alexandria.

More than that, aside from the now-broken door, there didn't seem to be any entrance of the place or anything connecting it to the building above. It was dry and cool, and there didn't seem to be anything else of note, except for an old grate made of brass, or maybe bronze, that I assumed led to the city's sewer system.

It was as I finally, painfully dragged myself to my feet that I saw it. From somewhere far beyond the grate, as the setting sun fell on it, came the glint of something round and white. It was only for a second, and if I hadn't spent so long training to spot objects that distance I probably wouldn't have noticed it, but there was definitely something there.

I approached the metal grate expecting to smell the sewer beyond, but instead there came the scent of something else. All that, at that point I had no idea what it was but I would have described it as not unlike wood. I tested the grate and found it came away easily from the floor, leaving a hole large enough to climb through without any problems.

I had taken to keeping a torch on me on my walks, as I sometimes had a tendency to wander too far, and so I'd be walking back in the dark. Shining it into the now-open hole revealed what looked like an old tunnel. Whether it was man-made, a naturally-occurring cave, or somewhere in between I couldn't say, but it was easily big enough for me to walk down. And once again I saw that glint of pale white a long way down, so I went in.

It was slow going, as my leg was still weak and the floor of the

tunnel was not level. I had to crouch at points and place my hands upon the dusty walls for support. After a few minutes I was deep enough that my torch was the only source of light, and the passage began to open up into what seemed to be a large room.

It was there, in a small alcove carved into the wall, that I saw what had caught the light. It was an old papyrus scroll lying amongst the shattered remnants of this case. I cast my torch around and saw more shelves carved into the walls of the chamber, each of which housed a scroll of its own. They were written in a language I didn't recognize, but they were old and they smelled of age and dry decay.

It wasn't the only room like that, there were dozens of chambers like it, all of different shapes and sizes connected like a warren. Some were empty, others still had a handful of old scrolls left in alcoves or fallen to the floor. It looked like the place had been looted long, long a time ago.

After checking through few rooms I was sure that whatever this was, it must have been a huge archeological find. I really didn't know who to tell about it, but I knew I needed to tell somebody. As I turned to head back towards the entrance, my torch beam fell upon something dark in an adjoining room.

It was a body. From the looks of it, the corpse had endured a long, long time and the dry air had almost mummified it, leaving a desiccated skin stretched tight over the bony frame. It wore what looked to be the remains of chainmail and a black Karloff Tabard with a pointed white cross emblazoned on the chest. A broken

sword lay nearby, now rusted almost into nothing, and as I gazed at the dead man's face I couldn't stop a chill running down my spine. I tried to tell myself that it was just the way the skull had warped over the years that made him look like he was screaming. His eyes were gone, but rather than simply decaying into nothingness, there were ragged scratches around the edge of the socket, leaving messy, hollow pits.

I was feeling very afraid now and had just turned around to leave when my torch abruptly turned off. It was the strangest thing. It should have been pitch dark. Though there was no light at all filtering through into those underground caverns, but it still – I could see everything. Every detail of the shriveled corpse before me was as clear as day. There was no light to see it, I can't explain it, even really describe how it felt, but it was absolute darkness and I could still see. At the same time I suddenly got the most intense feeling of being watched, like a thousand eyes turned to me at once.

I froze. From somewhere deeper within that strange, ancient library there was a sound of movement. The rustling of cloth, and a slow rhythmic step coming toward me. I started to back away towards the tunnel that had brought me there, but it was hard. The sense of being watched was getting stronger, an almost physical weight that seemed to drag me down.

I reached the mouth of the tunnel just as a figure came into view. It wore what looked like the remains of an ancient robe, and in the darkness I could see long spindly fingers stretching, probing toward me. From within its huge, flowing hood I could see nothing except a

single lidless eye. I don't know at what point I started screaming, but I know I didn't stop until I was restrained by military police fleeing through the streets of Alexandria in the early hours of the morning. I spent another month there undergoing psychiatric evaluation before being discharged.

GERTRUDE

I see. Did you ever locate that basement again?

WALTER

Well, I wanted to, but I was supervised the rest of my time in Alexandria.

GERTRUDE

Did you tell any of your superiors about it?

WALTER

No. I was half convinced I'd dreamt the whole thing up.

GERTRUDE

And did you replace the grate?

WALTER

[stammering] The what?

GERTRUDE

The bronze grate over the entrance to the archive. Did you replace it when you fled?

WALTER

Oh yeah, yes – yes, I think I did.

GERTRUDE

One other thing. That feeling of being watched. Have you ever had it since?

WALTER

Well, I wasn't sure when to say anything, but yes. I have just now. That funny turn I took on the way down the stairs, I felt it again. All those eyes watching me.

GERTRUDE

Thank you, Walter. Now, I –I need to check some maps with you, but I don't think we need that on tape. Are you all right here for now?

WALTER

I should be.

GERTRUDE

It's unlikely to happen, but if anyone else comes down here–

WALTER

I'll tell them I'm an old friend of yours paying you a visit.

GERTRUDE

Thank you. This statement is off the record and I don't want anyone to bother you about it further. Let's keep it between us.

GERTRUDE

Well, that was certainly useful.

It's taken a long time to track down someone still living who found the Serapeum of Alexandria. It's not a full confirmation of my theory about ancient iterations of the archive, but I'm certainly feeling validated for pursuing it.

I had been working on the assumption that the great library itself would have fulfilled the function, but it makes a lot more sense that it would have been the Serapeum offshoot. The ruins of the main Serapeum itself near Pompey's pillar are quite well researched, so this could be the secret caves mentioned in certain accounts of its destruction.

According to Eunapius, the destruction of the Serapeum in 391 AD was conducted by a Christian mob, emboldened by the reforms of Pope Theodosius the First, attempting to drive the worship of other gods from Alexandria. There are other accounts, however, that claimed the scholars barricaded themselves inside with prisoners and retreated to hidden caverns deep below. Some even go so far as to claim the captives were tortured into the worship of pagan

deities or offered as blood sacrifices. There's even one unnamed contemporary historian that describes the mob attacking the Serapeum not as Christians, but using a phrase which roughly translates as "those who sing the night".

The corpse found by Mr. Heller would seem to be the remains of a hospitaller knight of the order of St. John, at least based on his description of the Tabard, most likely from the sack of Alexandria in 1365 by Peter the First of Cyprus. While generally grouped in with the rest of the Crusades, it's generally considered to be one of the few such attacks with no religious motivation. Given this discovery, however, I do wonder if there might have been… other reasons.

Regardless, I have further follow-up of my own to do. My biggest concern right now is whatever creature Mr. Heller encountered down there. It was 56 years ago, but if it's still alive, I should be careful. What was it? A guardian of some sort? Or perhaps… perhaps… it too was once an archivist.

ARCHIVIST

Well, only two tapes so far and already I… I don't know what to think.

Another archive, an earlier version. Am I just part of a chain? A long, unending string of people who call themselves "the archivist" stretching back to…

Are we all destined to end up like Gertrude, just following the same path? I need to find out more about her. One thing's becoming clear, though. She did not trust the Magnus Institute. Something that I can certainly sympathize–

[DOOR OPENS]

MARTIN

Was just going down to the cafe, did you want a sandwich?

ARCHIVIST

Er, that depends. Are you are you going to keep hovering around me if I go to the canteen?

MARTIN

I just worry. You needed five stitches after you "accidentally" stabbed yourself with the bread knife. If you're still claiming that's what happened–

ARCHIVIST

I am.

MARTIN

– then you'll forgive me for worrying when you use sharp knives.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. I'll come with. Just give me a second to grab my coat.

MARTIN

Sure.

[DOOR CLOSES]

ARCHIVIST

Mr. Heller died from a stroke in 2004, making followup on this tape difficult. But I've found a news article from March 1998, six months after the statement was taken. It reports an explosion in Alexandria which destroyed several buildings in the vicinity of Pompey's Pillar and killed 17 people. Official investigation determined it to be a gas mains explosion, but… I wonder.

Gertrude Robinson is not who I thought she was.

End supplement.

MAG054 – Still Life

Statement #0132306

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Alexander Scaplehorn, regarding his evaluation of "The Trophy Room" taxidermists in Barnet.

Original statement given June 23rd, 2013. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, head archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I try not to judge on appearances.

I have a certain sympathy with those who find themselves instinctively reviled by those about them. Not simply because I myself am what you might generously describe as "odd-looking", but because my career has taken me down the path of working for the Inland Revenue, and you should see the way people recoil from you when they find out you work for the taxman.

So I try to have a little bit more depth than that and give everyone a chance, so was with what could be described as an aggressively

open mind that I made my way to undertake an inspection of The Trophy Room – a taxidermist's shop near Woodside Park in Barnet.

I have never been in any way attracted to the idea of taxidermy aside from a few interesting examples in the Natural History Museum, but I was quite certain it didn't deserve its ghoulish reputation. Of course, I was inspecting it to ensure it wasn't being used for money laundering purposes, so if it turned out it was involved in criminal activity I would be quite justified in any bad opinion, I might care to indulge, but I didn't want to be premature

You see, the Trophy Room had been a staple of Woodside Park for some thirty years, but like many niche interest shops, seemed to see little real business. Its taxes were all in order, but there were very few regular customers and most of the money that kept it in the black came from occasional large transactions that seemed somewhat excessive for the items being purchased – all hallmarks of money laundering.

You'd be surprised how many businesses that you pass every day on the street are being used in a similar manner. Those shops that never seem to be open, or who cater to such a specific market you wonder how they can break even. Well, often they can't without some illicit assistance.

Now I'm not the police, I have no power to arrest anyone revoke any licenses or even issue a fine without a good deal of hassle, that all comes later and from other people. My job is just to discuss their compliances and policies to prevent money laundering and examine

their transactions to confirm that they're not too suspect. I find it fascinating but I am keenly aware that the majority of the people I inspect do not share my opinion.

As soon as I arrived at The Trophy Room I could tell that it was going to take some time.

The shop had that layer of grime that only accumulates after a business has been in place for decades without change, the painted golden letters were now a dirty brown and the edges of the olive green awning were streaked with muck. The stuffed tiger in the window was so faded by the sun that I had to do a double-take to check it wasn't a lion, so faint with the stripes. Its eyes were glassy and one of its teeth seemed to have broken off.

Even so, there was something about the curve of its mouth that drew me in, and I got so lost looking at it that I quite jumped when the bell above the door sounded its jarring clang.

I looked up to see a surprisingly young man standing there. I had expected some crusty old gamekeeper type judging by the look of the place, but instead this fresh-faced 20-something held out his hand for me to shake. I did so. The hand was firm and very dry.

I asked him if he was the owner, and he said he was, introducing himself as Daniel Rawlings. Apparently the place had belonged to an old friend of his father's, who didn't have much in the way of family, and when he passed away a few years before Daniel had inherited it.

I asked him if he was even interested in taxidermy and he just shrugged and gestured me inside.

The smell hit me as soon as I crossed the threshold. It was so thick you could almost taste it, like something had murdered a lily and it was rotting under the floorboards. Dreadful smell. I turned to see Daniel lighting a cigarette as if in acknowledgment of the odor. He just shrugged again and said it was chemicals, casting an eye over the assembled collection of taxidermied wildlife.

It was then that I became aware of them. Hundreds of glassy dead eyes staring at me from all directions. A huge moose in front of me, a shelf full of squirrels along the wall, unmoving ravens attached to an old electric chandelier, and dozens and dozens of fish mounted on plaques or sealed in fake tanks.

Fur, feathers, scales, every manner and type of dead skin surrounded me, each frozen in uncanny stillness as though they were trapped in a world where time had simply stopped. Everything except their eyes of course. Their eyes had never been alive and they all seemed to stare in my direction, so that to look too close at any of them was to gaze into that unseeing glass.

I took a moment to compose myself and try to remember that I had made a decision to not judge the shop or its owner based on the fact that many consider taxidermy unsettling. I could see myself becoming one of these people and I fought very hard against the feeling of wrongness that seemed to be trying to worm itself into my mind.

I forced myself to pay Daniel some vague compliment about the variety of his pieces as he lit another cigarette. I considered mentioning the smoking ban but that wasn't really why I was there, so I just started talking about money laundering instead.

He nodded and said he'd had the letter announcing the inspection and had got all the accounts and transactions for the past few years ready for me, he explained that as he'd only taken over the business very recently he wasn't aware of much in the way of anti-money laundering policies or procedures. This was music to my ears, as there's very little I enjoy more than taking an engaged new business owner through the basics and in a few minutes I'd forgotten all the glassy eyes that seemed to follow me around the room. (At least mostly.)

Daniel seemed remarkably interested when I outlined basic checks in due diligence, but it wasn't the first time. People, especially new business owners, tend to sit up and take notice when HMRC turns up for a visit. I mean, I try not to exploit my position, but people take a visit from the taxman very seriously and it can produce some wonderfully attentive audiences.

Daniel didn't seem panicked or worried though, simply intrigued. He asked all the right questions and was always ready with a good example for any of the more abstract aspects of the discussion. All in all he was a real pleasure to discuss money laundering with. I'd even stopped noticing the smell after a while, though I'd become aware of it again whenever he started another cigarette, something that usually happened almost immediately after he finished his last

one. I can't even imagine what his lungs must have looked like.

The only thing there was a touch awkward was that he seemed determined to avoid eye contact, looking at the floor, or the taxidermied animals, but never directly at me. It was a little bit disconcerting, but I have a cousin with autism so it wasn't an entirely new situation to me.

Eventually the discussion ended and Daniel talked through some of the potential policies he was going to put in place. They actually seemed a bit excessive given that he was the only person currently employed at the Trophy Room, but I certainly wasn't going to tell him to be less careful.

I then asked if I could have a look at his books, and he nodded again and took me through to the backroom.

The office behind the main shop was small and very clean. Most of the space was taken up by a large oak desk, and I could see another door leading through to what seemed to be a workshop judging by the tables and bags of sawdust.

Daniel handed me his account books, bank records, and receipts and left me to it. None of it had been digitized and I could tell it was going to take me a long time to get through it all. The smell was fainter here though, so it wasn't quite as dreadful as it might have been.

There was taxidermy in this room as well, though different to the ones out front. Hung along the back walls were pelts and treated

animal skins. They looked very old. Some I recognised as a Native American or African in origin, and one seemed so old I was worried to even breathe near it in case it collapsed into dust.

On top of the desk, pressed up against the wall was a mounted hare in a small waistcoat. It reminded me of the white rabbit from Alice in Wonderland, although its fur was faded and now stained a faint yellow. I found its face a bit more unsettling than the others though I couldn't tell you why, and I tried not to look too closely at it as I went through the shop's records.

It didn't look like there was any money-laundering going on, which was a relief. The prices that people were occasionally paying for the stuffed creatures were very high, but I'm by no means an expert on the industry and there didn't seem to be anything else suspicious in the books.

I did wonder the sort of people he was selling to though.

From the back room I watched four customers enter over the course of the day. In each case I watched as they got more and more unnerved before finally fleeing back out the door, trying to rationalize their fear. I sympathized.

It was almost closing time when Daniel came back to check on me. I gave him the good news. He didn't seem particularly relieved but told me he was glad to hear it. Then he laughed and asked if I knew how honored I was. I didn't understand.

He told me that I was sat here among some of the oldest skin in the

world. That was how he phrased it. It put me a bit on edge and I cast a nervous glance towards the workshop before reminding myself that I was keeping an open mind about his strange profession.

Daniel started to go through the pieces on display. Buffalo skin from North America, jaguar from the South, a wolf pelt from the early Middle Ages. The hare, he said, had been part of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and it helped drive Victorian England mad for the craft.

I didn't like the emphasis he put on "mad" when he said that.

Finally he pointed to the oldest of the pelts. He told me it was gorilla skin from Carthage, brought by Hanno in the 5th century BC, and it might just be the oldest piece of taxidermy in the world.

To be honest I didn't believe him. Even if a gorilla's hide could be preserved for more than two millennia, it seemed an unlikely thing to be found in the back of a shop in Barnet. It was clearly very old though, and I didn't challenge him on it.

I was just about to make my excuses and go when the bell rang out at the front of the shop, and a pair of obnoxious Cockney voices started to call out for Daniel. His face went blank at this and he asked me to excuse him one second, abruptly leaving me in the back room alone.

I heard the men say something about unloading a van and then the bell rang again, taking Daniel with it. I was alone.

I was just packing up and making some final notes for my report when I heard something. It was muffled but definitely seemed to be words. It sounded like it was coming from beneath the floor. I looked and saw a ring pull connected to a small door I hadn't noticed, which I assumed led to a basement.

The sound came again. I cast a look into the main shop to see if Daniel had returned, but it was quiet.

I knew opening the door was a stupid thing to do. I can't imagine a single scenario where it would have ended well for me, but the whole place was so strange that part of me couldn't resist seeing how deep the rabbit-hole went, if you'll pardon the joke.

So I opened the door.

It did indeed have a flight of stairs disappearing down into what seemed to be a basement. If there was a light switch I couldn't see it. It was impossible to see anything beyond the first dozen steps or so. The light that filtered through from the dim bulb behind me did illuminate one thing though.

A face.

I couldn't make out any details but it was pale and swayed ever so slightly from side to side. The body below it was shadowed and hidden but it seemed to stare up at me as it moved.

It spoke, the cadence identical to what I had heard through the wooden door.

“We’ve got one down here. Come on, I’ll show you.”

It was so flat, almost mechanical. It felt about as much like genuine speech as the wind flowing through a cracked rock sounds like a flute being played. Which is to say they may sound almost identical, but only one of them is made by a living human. I started to say something, to call out, but my voice died in my throat slightly as the face retreated back into the basement.

“We’ve got one down here. Come on, I’ll show you.”

I turned and walked very briskly into the main shop. I was now fully terrified and could feel the cold sweat dripping off my forehead. In the doorway stood Daniel. He asked if I was alright with a smile that made my stomach drop, and at last he looked me in the eyes.

I recognized the glassy stare. The same eyes that gazed at me from a hundred sawdust filled sockets around the room.

When they all began to move I nearly broke down. If I had, I have no doubt that I would be dead or maybe far worse. Instead I had a sudden rush of adrenaline and charged into Daniel, knocking him sprawling to the floor in surprise. It was like hitting a sandbag.

His two Cockney friends were too slow to grab me before I was off down the road. I may not look it, but I can move it a fair pace when I need to, and I did so for almost an hour before I finally felt safe enough to stop.

I was very lucky, you know. I had the foresight to gather all my notes before I opened the basement door. It meant I didn't have to return, I could simply write them up a glowing report and never think about it again.

Save for giving you my statement of course. And that's exactly what I did. After all, whatever all that other stuff was, they weren't laundering money.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

It was with some trepidation that I made the discovery that the Trophy Room is still in business and still under proprietorship of Daniel Rawlings. It's the sort of lead we never get in these cases, still active and available for investigation. However, given the events detailed here, I had some very serious reservations about sending anyone to investigate. I may not entirely trust my assistants but I won't lose them.

Eventually Sasha volunteered. I warned her it might be dangerous but she did seem very keen. It turned out to be rather a letdown in the end.

Sinister as the taxidermy was, there was apparently no figure in the basement, which Rawlings was happy to let her investigate, nor any obvious weirdness to any other aspect of the shop. Rawlings denies any memory of specifically Cockney deliverymen, but I'm sure I don't need to spell out my suspicions there.

There's nothing we can prove and if he doesn't want to talk there's precious little we can do to change his mind. He also denies being the same Daniel Rawlings who disappeared from Edinburgh in 2006.

He allowed Sasha to take a photograph of him and I've been comparing the pictures available for the Daniel Rawlings who disappeared. It's the strangest thing. They're different heights, different builds, different shapes to the face, but their hair is identical.

Their eyes on the other hand are not, and I find it hard to credit that they could be the same person. Another dead end.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

Supplemental.

I broke into Gertrude's flat.

I was doing some digging when I discovered that her home had not yet been relet. A quick discussion with the agent confirmed that there were some legal delays due to the manner of her disappearance and death, and she was paid up for the next six

months, so they hadn't yet cleared it out.

So I broke in. It wasn't easy and the window meant that I didn't get a lot of time before I heard sirens but I think I got away with it.

I learned a few things from this. Firstly, Gertrude lived a very minimalist existence. There was nothing in the kitchen except teabags, a pot, kettle, and a single mug. Her bed was neatly made and she had a single bookshelf filled with an array of volumes, mostly on history. Judging by the bag I found nearby, I think she must have gotten rid of books once she had read them.

She didn't own a television, but I did find something that piqued my interest: a laptop charger. There was no sign of the computer that went with it, but the indication that she might have owned one has inserted itself rather high on my priorities list.

Still, her home has given me little information in of itself, though it continues to prove that my impressions of Gertrude could hardly have been less accurate. I'm starting to feel like the only correct assumption I made about her was that she probably liked tea.

Oh, and I looked through a handful of books on her shelf. They were very well taken care of, with the exception that anytime a person's face was featured on the cover, their eyes had been cut out and very carefully removed.

End supplement.

[CLICK]

MAG055 – Pest Control

Statement #0160311

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Say it again, please.

JORDAN

Excuse me?

ARCHIVIST

What you just said, can you say it again, so I have it on tape?

JORDAN

Oh, okay.

“Jane Prentiss is dead.”

ARCHIVIST

You’re sure. Completely.

JORDAN

Yeah. I watched the incineration.

ARCHIVIST

And there were no… complications?

JORDAN

Like… what?

ARCHIVIST

Surviving worms that escaped, uh, movement from the body during incineration, *noises* from it, like screams or chanting, *weird* feelings, like a thousand tiny crawling things are moving across your skin?

JORDAN

Wow! No, nothing like that. Just the smell, but, I mean, I'll get to that.

It went well. Nothing left but the ashes I gave to your friend. Which I shouldn't have, by the way, so keep it to yourself.

ARCHIVIST

Of course. And *thank* you.

JORDAN

Sure.

ARCHIVIST

It's been months, though. Why are you just looking to make your

statement now?

JORDAN

It's not really… it's not just burning her body. I was also the one that was first called in to deal with the nest in her old apartment.

ARCHIVIST

Oh…

JORDAN

Yeah! But there are a few things I've been thinking about, putting some pieces together, and I thought, well, you guys should probably know.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Well, start from the beginning, wherever you feel comfortable. Statement of Jordan Kennedy regarding…?

JORDAN

Several weird things I've found while working in pest control.

ARCHIVIST

Statement taken direct from subject, 3rd November, 2016.

Statement begins.

JORDAN (STATEMENT)

I've worked as an exterminator for the better part of 10 years now. I should say pest controller, really – the BPCA generally advise against using the e-word. They feel it sounds a bit too unpleasant, harms our public image. I've never really minded. I mean, I guess I could say killing things is sort of exerting control over them, but I've always felt that trying to sanitize my job is somehow a bit dishonest. Like trying to help people forget that what they're actually doing is commissioning the deaths of creatures which we've deemed too disgusting or unhealthy to live. It needs doing, don't get me wrong, and I'm happy enough to do it, but it isn't my job to hold people's hands and make them feel better about it.

I've done places all over London – mainly big commercial buildings where I have to work at night, while all the bankers and the like have gone home. Setting traps, putting down poison boxes, the usual. Residential homes don't call me out quite as much for rats and mice, especially if it's a rental place. Most landlords don't bother paying out for that sort of thing, or try to deal with it themselves.

Get a lot of calls about bedbugs, though. Those little bastards the devil to get rid of, and of course come summer we have to deal with plenty of wasps nests. Sprinkle in a generous handful of cockroaches, ants, and occasionally even birds or foxes, and you have a pretty good idea of what my working life consists of. Pretty normal.

Got my first weird call about five years ago. It was ants – or, so I was told. Down in Bromley. The house itself looked like a pretty

standard suburban home. Maybe a bit more rundown than its neighbours, but nothing particularly unusual about that, especially if they were calling me in. There was no car in the driveway, and the blinds were all drawn despite the summer sun. It didn't look like there was anyone home.

I found out later that it had actually been one of the neighbors that called me in, a woman named Laura Star, but at that point I was still expecting to be met by someone at the house. I knocked on the door, but obviously there was no answer.

Now, I always wear gloves when I'm on the job and when I noticed my hand, I noticed a very faint sheen where the thin leather had touched the wood. It seemed to be some sort of oily residue. I was feeling less comfortable with the job by the second. I couldn't hear anything from inside, so I knocked again. The woman who hired me had said to let myself in, but I didn't want to just waltz in unannounced.

After a few seconds of silence, I tried the handle, and sure enough, the door opened. There were no lights on inside, and the place seemed almost completely empty of furniture. I could see faint movement on the wooden floor as I looked around for the light switch. I found it quickly enough, and flicked it on to reveal exactly what I'd expected. Ants. I just hadn't expected that many. And there were so very many of them. To this day I have never seen more ants inside a building at once. There must have been thousands carpeting the floor and swarming over the walls.

I drew my hand back from the light switch as I noticed dozens of them crawling around it. Even the bulb seemed to be covered with them, causing the light in the room to be covered with twitching shadow. The house itself didn't look much better. Wherever there was a gap in the ants I could see that same oily rot, and I couldn't escape the idea that the building was somehow sick.

Now, I've seen plenty of disgusting things in this job, but I reckon that moment was one of the most intense. I fled briefly back to my van to decide on my next move. Normally, I'd leave out some poison bait for them to take back to their colony, eliminating the problem at its source, but an infestation that bad, well, that doesn't come from nothing.

I needed to get a sense of exactly what I was dealing with. Even from the road I could see a steady stream flowing out the open door and over the step. I kitted up with pesticide spray and headed in for a closer look. I wouldn't normally bother using spray on ants, but this wasn't normal, and the formula I was using works on ants just fine. That said, I didn't actually see any of them die. I wouldn't have expected to immediately, anyway, and what was important is that wherever I sprayed, they fled, clearing a path of discolored floor for me to walk.

It was slow going, but I got through most of the ground floor like that, and didn't see anything except more ants. No people, no furniture, nothing. At least until I reached the kitchen and saw the fridge.

There was nothing else in that kitchen. Even the sink had been removed, leaving just the water pipes sticking out of the wall, like rusty, diseased bones. But up against the far wall stood an old fridge. Its once white-skin was now a jaundiced yellow, and I couldn't quite shake the feeling that it was pulsing ever-so-gently. Thick, black, massive ants swarmed from the crack in its door and I had no doubt that whatever was at the heart of this incredibly unpleasant situation, it was going to be in that fridge.

So, I decided it was probably a good idea to step outside for a cigarette before I opened it. The air outside seemed much fresher as I left the house. I walked a few yards away from the door, so that I wasn't too close, and then I lit up. It was as I took the first drag that I saw a car pull up to the driveway. It was a small red compact, and the license plate seemed to indicate that it had only been bought the year before. But even so, I could see the rust starting bubble the paint near the edges of the paneling.

I watched as the door opened and a man stepped out. He was tall, maybe six-and-a-half feet, but it was hard to be sure of his shape inside the huge, brown suit he was wearing. He took one look at me, then the sign on the side of my van that read "Kennedy Pest Control," and his face began to crease with rage.

I took another drag on my cigarette. I was… uneasy about the whole situation, and was waiting to see what the strange-looking man would do. He walked up to me, great strides that brought him close enough that I could see the unhealthy gloss of sweat on his skin. Was everything here sick?

He leaned in far closer than I was comfortable with and demanded to know what I was doing. I told him that the homeowner had hired me to take care of an ant infestation, and I'd been doing a preliminary sweep. He started to shake his head violently, saying that he was the homeowner, that this was his house, and I had no business being there. Well, those weren't his exact words. What he actually said was that I had no business "applying my vile trade on his property."

I was about to get out my phone and call the woman who hired me when his hand shot out without warning and grabbed me by the throat. He lifted me off my feet with a strength that terrified me, and I was very glad that, even with the hood down, my protective suit kept my neck covered. I could feel his hand through the thick plastic. It was hot, like he was running some incredibly high fever, and I started to panic.

He held me there, almost a foot off the ground, and my vision began to swim as he squeezed my throat. As I struggled for breath, I flailed for something to fight him off with, and realized I was still holding my lighter. With a the degree of composure that, looking back on it now, still surprises me, I flicked the lighter on, and raised it to just below his arm.

The result was a lot more dramatic than I expected. His loose brown suit sleeve caught almost immediately, and within a few moments, his whole arm was alight. He yelped and dropped me onto the ground. As he began to flail about, trying to stop the fire spreading further across his body I staggered to my van. By then, it didn't

matter who the rightful owner of that house was, I was *done* with that job.

It was as I was climbing into the van that I smelled it. It is the most disgusting thing I have *ever* encountered, halfway between sun-cured roadkill, stale sweat, and rotten eggs, with just a hint of burning rubber. And underneath it all is that undefinable scent of sickness. You know, that smell you get when you enter a room where someone's been ill for several days. No matter what else it smells like, beneath it all there's that vague but undeniable whiff of disease. That's what this man smelt like as he desperately tried to extinguish his burning flesh.

I drove away, trying not to gag, and I didn't look back. I didn't call the police, either as I felt they might not look too kindly on me setting a man alight, even if he did attack me. I assume he didn't file a report, either, as no one ever turned up to question me about it.

So, that was the *first* time I encountered that smell.

ARCHIVIST

I see. And the other time was when you burned Jane Prentiss?

JORDAN (STATEMENT)

Not… just.

I mean, I didn't actually *see* her. The incineration was the first time I ever saw her in person. But a couple of years ago, I was called in

to deal with the wasp's nest.

That's what the landlord had called it on the phone, at least – apparently, it had injured one of his tenants earlier that day, and I was the first pest control service he had called that was free immediately. He didn't tell me the name of the tenant, though obviously I now know who it was. He didn't give me any real details on the phone, but he seemed happy to pay the emergency call-out charge, so I bundled up my wasp gear and headed out to Prospero Road.

It was a bit strange to get a call about wasps at that time of year. It was late February or early March, I think, and still quite cold. Still, if it was a warm enough building, they could easily be getting active. Regardless, I made sure to check over the thick suit I used for that sort of job, to make sure there was no weakness or damage. If they were aggressive enough to injure someone, I wasn't gonna take any chances.

The landlord's name was Arthur Nolan. He was a short man with a constant scowl, thinning white hair, and a well-chewed cigar. It looked like his denim shirt had once contained quite an athletic build, but it had long since sailed. He looked me up and down as I left my van, and I saw his mouth twist briefly in irritation. Clearly, he wasn't impressed.

I gave him the usual talk through what was gonna happen, and he nodded absently before pressing the keys to flat four into my hands and pointing me towards it. If I needed anything, he said, he'd be in

flat one, where he lived. I advised him and the other tenants to stay out the building while I was dealing with the wasps, but he just grunted and told me again that he'd be in flat one. The other tenants had apparently already left.

I loaded up on insecticide and headed in. It was a lot quieter than I expected. By the time I was outside flat four, I would normally have expected to be hearing the buzzing sound of wasps, but the evening was quiet. I opened the door slowly – no sudden movements that might alarm anything on the other side – but again the flat seemed to be empty.

It looked like there'd been some chaos, though, with books and clothes strewn across the floor, and a shattered TV screen in the corner. I found the ladder up into the loftspace in the center of the bedroom. It was quite small, and climbing in my bulky suit was tricky, but I got up there. Still no wasps, but it was very dark, so I rooted around again until I found the switch to a single bare bulb. The light was very faint, but enough to make out a thick, pulpy lump up against the far wall.

It certainly didn't look like any wasp's nest I'd seen before. I mean, the shape was familiar enough, but the texture of the surface was *way* off. It seemed a lot less papery than would have been normal, and the walls were less… regular, going off at odd angles and making it kind of hard to look away. The whole thing was spongy, pocked with tiny holes, and generally looking very unhealthy indeed. And most disconcerting of all, there were still no wasps.

None of this changed the job I had to do, so I figured I'd start off like any other wasp's nest and see if it worked. I reached forward, staying as far from this thing as the nozzle would let me, and I pushed it into one of the larger holes. It sank in with almost no resistance at all. I took a deep breath, and pulled the trigger, spraying the insecticide dust deep into the mass.

The effect was immediate. The whole thing started to pulse and spasm, the spongy flesh of it throbbing and bubbling like some sort of vile putty. It began to grow in size, blossoming out and covering the rest of the nozzle, reaching out for me. And then it began to… scream. Not the sound of air escaping, or a buzzing that *sounded* like screaming, the weird nest thing was letting out a long, warbling cry of anger and pain.

I dropped the pump and was down the ladder so fast I almost fell into the flat below. I could still hear it as I reached the door to the corridor. I threw it open only to be confronted by the face of Arthur Nolan, the landlord, staring at me with a look of disappointment.

He nodded and began to walk down the hall. I followed him, desperate for answers, but he just ignored my questions about what the hell was going on, about what that thing was, and kept walking down the stairs to his own flat. At one point he shook his head and mumbled something about hoping it wouldn't get this far, but he didn't seem to be saying it to me.

As soon as the door opened I became aware of how uncomfortably warm flat one was. The air was thick and dry, and made my throat

feel a bit scratchy. The landlord continued to ignore my presence, and walked over to an old armchair in the center of the room. As he did so, he started to unbutton his denim shirt.

Moreso than anything else that happened, that was the thing that finally stopped me in confusion. I couldn't understand what he was doing. As he sat down, his shirt flapped open, and I saw what looked to be an intricate scar on his chest. If I had to guess what it was, I'd have said it looked like a stylized flame, but it also made me think of a face contorted in pain.

Time seemed to move slowly as he reached for the ashtray on the arm of the chair, and picked up a pack of matches. He struck one, and without even looking at me, he gently pressed the small flame to the center of the scar.

His flesh caught fire immediately. The flames spread across his body like rippling water. The armchair caught, then the floor, and then I was running out of the building before the roiling inferno covered me as well. This time, I didn't drive away. I stood there and I watched it burn until the fire brigade arrived.

It was when the fire hit that attic space at the top floor, where I knew that awful nest still sat. That was when I smelled it: the same grotesque stench that had come from that oily, fevered man three years before.

At the time, I didn't really connect the two. I was too busy trying to comprehend what had just happened. And when trucks from the

ECDC showed up to put me in quarantine, it slipped my mind entirely.

They were surprisingly forthcoming about Jane Prentiss and what had happened, and after an extensive debriefing, they actually offered me a job. Apparently, disease control and pest control often go hand in hand, and I've been working for them since. Most of the job's been mundane – a couple slightly weird, but nothing like those two.

ARCHIVIST

So why make your statement now?

JORDAN

When I helped incinerate her body, I smelled it again. Like before. Took me awhile to piece the two together, but I thought you should know.

ARCHIVIST

Are you saying there might be more out there like her?

JORDAN

God, I hope not. I don't know. The man from the ant house, he wasn't like her, not at all.

But that smell when they burned… I think they're connected, somehow. And that scares me.

ARCHIVIST

Yes… yes, it rather scares me too.

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Mr. Kennedy's statement has left me somewhat rattled. While I am always glad of any further closure to the case of Jane Prentiss, this seems to come with the rather *serious* caveat that she might not have been working alone.

No, that, that doesn't sound right. Jane Prentiss – or whatever this "flesh hive" was that took her – does not seem like the sort of being that would work well with others.

The house in Bromley was torn down last year, but Martin managed to locate the ownership records. It was listed as belonging to John Amherst. The dates aren't entirely clear as to whether this was just before or just after he apparently took charge of Ivy Meadows Nursing Home, but there can be no doubt that it was the same person. All the ownership records from the ant house lead to dead ends or deactivated bank accounts.

It doesn't *sound* like he's another flesh hive… and yet… No connection, except disease, and insects, and a foul smell when they burn.

Jane Prentiss is dead. But this is a long way from over.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

Supplemental.

I… I don't have much to report, actually. It's been Halloween week, which means the research department is always inundated with statements. Most of them are patently false, but the volume means that they've called in the archive to assist with the overflow.

It's… been nice, actually. Disproving piles of nonsense felt good, like real work, not just driving myself to distraction with conspiracy theories and paranoia. I even got a good night's sleep. I miss those days.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG056 – Children of the Night

Statement #0100710–B

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Continued statement of Trevor Hebert, regarding the latter years of his career as a vampire hunter.

Original statement given July 10th, 2010.

Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, head archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Note: several pages are missing from the file around the time that he apparently did *not* die of lung cancer in the institute.

Statement resumes.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

She died in the end.

Sad old thing but she didn't deserve that. Always wondered what would have happened if I'd gotten there a bit sooner.

Trouble is, once they've really got their teeth into you you're as

good as dead even if they don't drain you. Gushing on the floor or bloating a vampire's belly doesn't make much difference to the poor fool bleeding out.

I often wondered if I was mad, you know. I mean, no one else seems to have seen these things, and I found plenty across my life. Perhaps I just got the smell of them.

Like, no one else ever really got away and my early escape from Sylvia MacDonald gave me a sense that could pick them out.

There's a sharpness to them. They're hunters. But over the years I've become a hunter as well and maybe predators recognize each other. All I know is, these days I can almost smell the blood coming off them.

That's not to say I can't be wrong though. I can be very wrong indeed.

I found Alard Dupont in the summer of 1982 and murdered him shortly afterwards. I used the word murder here, where I have not before, because he was the only one I've killed I know to have been human.

In most ways I regret his death, but there is a certain comfort to it. If I was just a serial killer with a hallucination I don't see why my mind wouldn't have made Dupont vampire as well.

The fact that I was able to kill normal people reassures me that the creatures I hunt are real. Do you understand?

That's not to say that the death of Alard Dupont wasn't the result of several extremely bad decisions on my part. In the early 80s, I was deep in the grip of my twin addictions. As I mentioned, after a while the hunt became an addiction of its own. Of the two I have always found heroin the easier one to quit.

Heroin is calm. It's a small chunk of peace in a world that's full of nothing but hard edges. It's hard to put that down permanently, but the hunt…

The hunt is a purpose. It's not just a way to get through the day, it's a reason for there to be a day at all.

I tried to give it up for a while after Dupont but it burned in me far deeper than any hitch I got when I was clocking.

Back in '82 though those addictions were running pretty much unchecked. It had been several years since I'd last found a vampire and every waking moment I wasn't high was spent in keen lookout for anything suspicious.

I was in bad shape physically. I'd acquired an infection from injecting between my toes, which would eventually hospitalized me and lead to my losing two of them, though I luckily kept the foot. At that point though it just slowed me to a limp and caused me a reasonable amount of pain.

Perhaps if I'd been faster, able to keep up with Dupont more easily, I would have realized my mistake. Perhaps if my mind hadn't been so fogged with brown I might have beaten it out, or perhaps if I

hadn't been so dead eager to kill another vampire any of these might have saved him. Maybe even if he'd had a name that didn't make me think of Dracula.

But none of those things were the case, so dwelling on them is pointless.

I don't know if Dupont was technically a mute or not. I've had no real experience with the condition and he didn't seem to have any problems with his hearing.

Either way I never saw him speak, which by now I'm sure you know is what I would consider a significant warning sign for vampirism.

A friend of mine I shared a shelter with some weeks before, and who shared a similar weakness for narcotics, had mentioned how amazing it was that his dealer was always able to know exactly what he was after without either of them saying.

In retrospect I should have realized that it didn't exactly match the vampires I'd met before, who'd never displayed any sort of mind-reading, but I was aching for a killer.

The kid who told me this was a weird one. Must have been about nineteen years old, told everyone his name was Stanley Kubrick. He was always making references to his film career, and I was never able to figure out if it was actually his real name that he happened to share with the director, or if it was just some weird joke he was really committed to.

What struck me about him more than that, though, were the scars on his neck.

I later discovered they were from a dog attack when he was younger, but at the time I was convinced they were connected to Dupont so I found were allowed Dupont made his handovers at Piccadilly Gardens and I started to watch.

He was surprisingly brazen about it – sat there on a park bench for hours smoking or reading some magazine or other. I've never seen a vampire read a magazine before, but I had seen them pantomime watching television or reading a book to better blend in, so it didn't raise any suspicions for me.

Then came the moment that fully convinced me I had to kill Dupont.

As he sat there on the bench two policemen walked past me heading towards him. They took no notice of me, nobody notices a tramp.

But as they walked up the path towards the figure on the bench one of the police nudged his partner and gestured towards him. They clearly considered him suspicious and began to walk over.

As they got close though Dupont looked up and made eye contact with them.

They stopped just for a moment and he nodded gently. The policeman looked at each other, turned, and walked away.

That was all I needed to be sure of what he was.

The idea I have come to since then, that the two police officers were simply on the take and hadn't immediately recognized him, didn't occur to me until much later.

It was an overcast day and it seems to me that Dupont was keeping in the shadows just as I thought he would. I kept watching as he made a few more transactions.

I was craving a hit of my own by that point. There was a much more intense rush I was chasing just then and it pushed all thoughts of junk to the back of my mind.

Eventually evening fell and I watched Dupont rise from his bench and make his way down to the town center, keeping downwind of him and sticking to the shadows. Obviously the darkness would be no impediment to him spotting me but I'd learned that, inconspicuous as a homeless man might be, it's still always best to be seen by as few witnesses as possible.

I figured he was heading towards a nightclub or dance, a favorite haunt of the vampire since the loud music makes their lack of speech that much easier to hide. I was right in as far as he headed towards the Hacienda, one of the loudest clubs in Manchester. It wasn't as notorious then as it would later become, in fact I think it had only recently opened when all this happened. But even at its worst it would probably have drawn the line at allowing me entrance given the state I was in.

So I watched Dupont head inside, adopting my camouflage of softly asking passersby for change and waited.

It was about two hours later that he emerged, another man following close behind him. I didn't recognize them, I mean there's no reason I should have, but Dupont's new friend was almost as big as he was.

Vampires tend to go for the smaller victims, those less able to defend themselves, should the initial surprise of their attack not be enough. This one really looked like he could take care of himself. Still, as far as I was concerned he had no idea what was about to happen to him. As Mr. Dupont led him down a nearby alley, I hurried after them.

I was quiet as I limped through the rubbish that covered the alleyway and I silently drew my trusty hammer. After a minute they turned in to a doorway and took out a key. The door opened and they both stepped inside.

I had a sudden alarm at the thought of getting locked out and being unable to reach him. Forgetting stealth, I grabbed the door and flung it open. They turned to face me.

I charged him with a cry, slamming the hammer into Dupont's shoulder and knocking him to the ground with a sickening crack.

I will never forget the moment I heard Alard Dupont scream.

There was such a piercing sound and something I'd never expected.

In a moment everything I'd built up in my head over the past couple of days shattered and I felt a sudden panic at what I'd done. What I was doing.

His friend screamed as well and started to run back out the door. I don't know if he got a good look at me. Given the police never came around to question me I guess not.

Dupont was still screaming, that horrid sound overriding all other thoughts. Blood was streaming from his face where it had hit the ground and I didn't know what to do. I had to get out of there, but that noise was too much.

I couldn't focus, couldn't do anything, so I hit him again. Hard. In the head. And then he was quiet, and everything was horribly still.

He just lay there.

I have never felt anything like the shame and disgust I felt at that moment.

I tried to burn his body more out of habit than anything else, but it didn't really take and I fled out into the street before the police arrived.

After that I spent over a decade in a very serious spiral. I don't remember much of it, except that I spent most of it so high that looking back I'm genuinely astounded I never OD'd. I only snapped out of it in '96 when a chance encounter with a creature that called itself Hannah Edwards led to my saving a young woman from

becoming its dinner.

I won't bother with details. It was very similar to my hunt for Jane Lewis except that the victim made it out alive this time.

I wonder why it is that I only ever seemed to find them just before they attack. It can't be that they spent every night feeding, the world would be a bloodbath.

Maybe they just blend in better when they're not on the hunt and I don't spot them. Or maybe they hibernate. It's not a question I think I'll ever be able to answer, but it does mean that there is always an urgency to the hunts that has for the most part stopped me doing much investigation into them.

Hannah was my fifth confirmed vampire and the last one, assuming I don't find another before the cancer takes me.

I really considered myself retired, resting after a life spent defending the world from the darkness. Because that's what I thought it was, you know. Vampires were what lurked in the dark. The only thing that lurked in the dark.

Last year though, just before my diagnosis, I met something that made me rethink this.

I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that winter is a hard time to be homeless. Doesn't matter how many times you've done it, when that first cold wind blows through you it's like some awful debt coming due.

The last one was really bad. A bunch of the shelters I normally hit up had closed up shop and those that were left tended to fill up fast.

I do pretty okay given I'm a well-known face and all that but I still felt the pressure to scrape enough cash together to secure my spot early. Even then there'd be a couple of times a week that I still ended up in the cold.

My old bones don't do so well at that these days, so I was keeping quite a close eye on the comings and goings around the night shelters of Manchester, and after a few weeks I started to notice something strange.

Several times at a couple of different shelters I watched one of the sleepers get up in the middle of the night, gather their possessions, and walk out into the freezing streets of the city. To see it happen once would have been strange but to see it happen several times was surreal. I was sober at the time so I couldn't even pass it off as a trick of the mind.

Even stranger, every time it happened, within 10 minutes a woman would walk in and take their place. It was the same one every time. She must have been about 40, and slender, though her clothes bulged a bit in odd places. Her face was lined from what I could recognize as a hard life and a thin layer of grime matted her hair.

She looked pretty normal for the place, and I could even write off the distant, neutral expression as the sort of trauma all too common among my people. That's why I didn't pay her any mind the first

time it happened, or the second.

When I noticed it happening a third time I finally started to pay attention, though I didn't approach her immediately.

I did ask about her the following morning but even the staff didn't seem to know anything. I decided to keep a lookout and if she turned up again I would confront her.

Well, she did.

It was late January when it happened, about 2:00 in the morning. Just when the night was at its coldest. I saw one of my fellow sleepers get slowly out of bed. His name was Craig, I think. I didn't know him well, he was a seasonal drifter and we'd only occasionally crossed paths.

Well, he walked out without a sound gathering up his belongings quietly and leaving an empty bed.

I waited wide awake, hand on my knife, breathing steady. Sure enough, a few minutes later, in she walks, no backpack or gear of any sort, and sat on Craig's bed.

I stood up and walked towards her. As soon as she saw me her posture changed and she became defensive, although the expression on her face and never changed from that blankness.

I started to introduce myself and ask how come she was taking over Craig's bed when she locked eyes with me, and the weirdest sensation began to flow through me. I wanted to leave. It wasn't

like with a vampire where I would feel like I'd been spoken to, this was just a sudden awareness of my own desire.

I've been sober for three years at that point but I felt like I desperately wanted to get high, and I knew that the best place to get some was out in the night.

Looking back I think it might have been my own mind rationalizing the way I felt my will being tugged out of the room, but it was still very powerful. If I hadn't had a lifetime's experience identifying and fighting off the effect of the vampire's gaze I probably would have done it too. But I did, so I stood my ground.

There was a long pause as that woman gazed levelly at me.

Then she broke into a run through the door and out. I followed. Didn't matter to me whether she was a vampire or not, there was something wrong and I wanted to find out what was going on.

I chased her out into the road. It was cold and still and if anyone saw us they didn't make a sound.

She ran strangely, more like a spasm, smooth steps, and her arms shifted in weird ways as she moved. I'm not as spry as I once was and my lungs were obviously shot but I managed to keep pace with her.

I could feel it in my blood. It was a hunt and I always felt stronger on a hunt.

Finally I got close enough to grab her by the arm. My fingers locked

around her elbow, and then they sort of sunk inside. They didn't go through the skin or anything but it sort of shifted beneath my fingers like when you squeeze an uncooked sausage.

I could feel movement from inside the arm itself. It wasn't a vampire but it definitely wasn't human.

With this other arm it took a wide sweeping swing at me, but I was prepared and ducked below the flailing punch.

I got my knife to try and threaten the thing, maybe get it to answer some questions, but I misjudged the draw and ended up slashing it slightly across its stomach. It wasn't a deep cut or a long one but apparently it was enough.

A whole body began to shudder as tiny shapes began to stream out of the wound.

Spiders.

Thousands and thousands of spiders.

She opened her mouth at last, as if to scream and more poured out. Tens of thousands of skittering legs and evil little eyes. I screamed and started to back up as the dark shapes pooled around her feet and spread out in a twitching circle.

For a second I was worried they were coming for me but then they just scurried off into the shadows and crevices of nearby buildings, until the street was empty of everything except this woman.

She was still standing upright, but from the open mouth, I could see that her body was completely hollow, save for a few cobwebs that I could just make out under the streetlights.

I ran the hell away and that's the last creature I encountered.

That's my whole story. You're welcome to it.

When I thought it was just vampires about, I might have given you people as miss as a bunch of kooks. But if there's other stuff around out there… maybe you know more about it than me.

And maybe you could use a bit more information on vampires.

It's a shame I'm on the way out.

I will miss the hunt.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

[agitated] Well, this is certainly a surprise. Martin informed me that Mr. Herbert passed away after making his initial statement, so it is rather a shock to find this misfiled addition to his original, even if it is partially incomplete.

What's more, actually checking the hospital and death records for both London and Manchester, I can't find any record of Mr. Herbert's death. Then again, I could find no record of him alive, either, after the date of the statement.

The idea that he could survive six years with untreated late-stage lung cancer is implausible, to say the least, and yet Alard Dupont's death appears to match the statement in most of the particulars. He had a half dozen convictions against him for various drug charges or violent misdemeanors, but nothing exceptional.

I can't find any indication of muteness, but aside from that, everything checks out.

As for the spider person, the only proof of its existence seems to be that I am far too unlucky for it to simply be an old tramp hallucination.

I need to have some words with Martin.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Sit down.

MARTIN

What is–?

ARCHIVIST

Sit. Why did you lie to me about Trevor?

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

[agitated] Why did you tell me he was dead?

MARTIN

Sorry, who's… who's Trev–

ARCHIVIST

Trevor Herbert. The tramp? The vampire hunter. You told me he died.

MARTIN

[nervously] But I mean he… did. Didn't he?

ARCHIVIST

Apparently not.

MARTIN

Oh! Sorry.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry?

MARTIN

I mean, I–I didn't ever actually meet him. I just heard some of the other researchers mentioning it.

ARCHIVIST

[whispered] *What?

MARTIN

Yeah, well, I could've sworn they said he died. I mean… maybe they just said he looks like death or something –

ARCHIVIST

[scoffs]

MARTIN

I really thought they said he was dead.

ARCHIVIST

[venomously] So that's it. Just a misunderstanding.

MARTIN

[stammering] Yes. You seem to be taking this kind of personal–

ARCHIVIST

Because you keep lying to me, Martin!

MARTIN

About what?!

ARCHIVIST

I don't know. But you are.

[RUSTLING PAPER]

MARTIN

Where did you get that? Have you been going through the bin?

ARCHIVIST

It was in the old document room, just next to where you used to sleep. Your handwriting. "If the others find out I've been lying" – lying about *what*, Martin?

MARTIN

Look, just forget about it, okay? Please.

ARCHIVIST

I *can't* forget it. Everyone in this place has so many goddamn secrets and I can't trust a word you say. Not about this and not about Trevor –

MARTIN

John, just–

[ARCHIVIST SLAMS ON DESK]

ARCHIVIST

[shouting] Martin!

MARTIN

Okay! Okay! Okay. Just… just… promise you won't… fire me.

ARCHIVIST

[scoffing] Fire you – fine.

[MARTIN TAKES DEEP BREATH]

MARTIN

I lied on my CV.

ARCHIVIST

…what.

MARTIN

I don't have a master's in parapsychology. I don't even have a degree.

I was 17, my mum, she had – she had some problems and I ended up dropping out of school trying to support us. I tried everything but nowhere was hiring, so I just kind of started to lie on my application, sending them out to just about anywhere.

For some reason my lie about parapsychology got me an interview with Elias and – and then a job here. But most of my employment details are made up. I'm only 29.

ARCHIVIST

[slight laugh] Right, I–I… uh… I believe you.

MARTIN

…why are you smiling?

ARCHIVIST

[audibly smiling] Yes, um, I jus… I won't mention it to Elias. Just between us.

MARTIN

[hesitant] So you don't mind?

ARCHIVIST

To be quite honest, Martin,, I'm really rather relieved.

[CLICK]

MAG057 – Personal Space

Statement #0090404

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Carter Chilcott, regarding his time spent in isolation aboard the space station Daedalus in September 2007.

Original statement given April 4, 2009. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, head archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

We're all alone out there.

I know the statistics. How big the universe is, the probabilities and proximities and the promises of other beings out there among the stars, but I've been there. There's *nothing*. Nothing but empty, uncaring void, lacing dead worlds and dead stars all together like a tapestry of lonely meaninglessness.

Humans have existed for the smallest sliver of a fraction of a moment in the existence of the universe, and we will be extinguished just as quickly. And when we are at last gone forever into the quiet emptiness of death, there will be nothing left but the cold universe.

And nothing shall mark our passing because there is nothing to do so.

Dismiss me if you wish to. Take comfort in your escapist fantasies of aliens and visitors from other worlds, but there's no proof I can give you beyond the testimony of one who has spent so very long staring into that black and empty infinity and knowing, truly knowing, what it means to be floating and forsaken in an empty universe.

I knew isolation experiments could be rough when I signed up. I'm not some naive fool who thought he'd endure a few quirky side effects for science. No, I'm an astronaut, so I do my research. When I was picked for the project, a long-term isolation study set in conditions of low Earth orbit, I read up on as many previous cases and similar experiments from the past 30 years, familiarizing myself with side effects and likely psychological hurdles.

It was daunting to say the least. I wasn't keen to experience some of what the previous tests seemed to promise what happened to my mind, but I didn't feel like I had much choice. I'd had my application to the International Space Station floating in limbo for so long that when a private consortium approached me telling me they'd recently launched Daedalus, a small manned satellite of their own, and needed qualified crew members, I jumped at the chance to go to space at last.

I should have realized that what they meant by "crew member" was "lab monkey". But to be honest, even after I found this out it didn't

do a lot to dampen my enthusiasm for the project. I was going to space.

There were two other people technically on the crew. I say technically as I never spent any time with them beyond the trip up to the Daedalus. Their names were Yan Kilbride and Manuela Dominguez. I'm sure that they probably did a lot more looking after the station than I ever did, but as far as I was concerned I was the only one up there.

From the chatter I heard before the mission began, each of us had an experiment of our own to be concerned with. But they were also there as a backup in case something went horribly wrong with mine, since the observing scientist simply didn't have the option of intervening themselves.

I remember the man in charge of my particular project, Conrad Lukas, made a face of rather overstated disgust when he told me I wouldn't be up there entirely on my own. I got the distinct impression he was one of those people who feel that ethical restrictions do nothing but bind the hands of the true scientist and leave them at the mercy of their subjects' limitations.

My section of the tiny space station was completely self-contained. There was food, sleeping arrangements, and zero-gravity exercise equipment, all for my personal use. The single entrance to the rest of the satellite was locked and sealed. It could be opened from either side but on my side it required a code. I did have access to the code in case of emergency, but I had way too much riding on

the mission to even think about being responsible for its early termination.

I also had one large domed window. It allowed me a decent view of the Earth below, as well as plenty of chance to stare off into space, which I did quite a lot in those early days.

I was told the other astronauts would do their best to avoid that window while doing maintenance or repair work outside. Mission Control had also supplied me with a lot of books and films and other entertainment as, like Conrad had told me at the first briefing, the experiment was into isolation, not boredom. So when I locked that door for the first time, I was feeling in pretty good spirits about the whole thing, to be honest.

I knew I was being monitored. There was a little camera mounted on the wall that kept a beady eye on me. It wasn't so invasive that I couldn't get away from it when I wanted to, but for the most part I was happy enough to eat and read and exercise in front of the watchful lens.

Obviously those assessing my progress would never communicate with me directly and they might not even be watching a live feed, so if they had opinions on how I was undertaking my task, I never heard them. Even if my task was just sitting around in a room in space waiting for my mind to break.

I tried not to take too much comfort in the knowledge that there were people watching my every move, as I felt that to find that

reassuring would go quite strongly against the spirit of the experiment. I had to really feel alone. That at least it didn't take too long to set in. I can't honestly see how strapping yourself in to sleep or drinking your juice with a space foil pack on the straw can have much effect on isolation, but I wasn't going to be the one to bring it up.

I believe some people would have been more disturbed than others by its location orbiting Earth, but it didn't feel markedly different to me from any of the other isolation studies they conducted over the last few decades. If anything the silent, rolling green and blue of the Earth far below was another source of comfort, in the sure knowledge of the billions of other people making their way through life who had no idea what was right above their heads.

Both of these comforts lasted me almost six weeks. That was when I was aware I should start to experience some of the more distressing side effects.

I'd already passed through listlessness and a bout of insomnia. And I hadn't been using my exercise machine properly for almost a fortnight, but I still didn't expect the severity of the hallucinations when they began.

Twice I was woken up by the sound of the door opening, only to find it as tight as it had ever been. Throughout the daytime I would occasionally hear footsteps, which shouldn't even have been possible in zero gravity. There was also a blackout for about 20 minutes at one point that may or may not have been real. Certainly

we didn't seem to lose power in any other systems except the lights.

So this was all reasonably distressing, but at least it had the advantage of not being unexpected. No, the first warning I got about how bad things were going to get was the spacesuit.

The clocks read it as 14:30 UTC and I was rewatching *28 Days Later*, one of the better films that had been provided for my entertainment, when a movement in the window caught my eye. At first I thought it might have been some orbital debris moving past, but then I spotted it, still at the edge of the domed window.

It was a hand. The white bulky gloved hand of someone wearing an EVA suit. It started to float slowly across the window, followed by the rest of the arm, then the torso, 'till almost the whole suit slowly floating across.

I was excited by the idea of seeing another human being at first, even if it was only brief or might compromise some of the work, but as the suit made its painstaking drift across the space outside, it rotated enough that I could see clearly through the suit's visor.

There was nobody inside. The floating suit was completely empty.

And I started to suddenly get very scared.

At last it had passed right across and off into the night, the other side, and I stopped to try and calm myself in the face of what had been a deeply strange thing to watch. I managed to do so, but only until I looked again out of that window.

There were no more empty, floating clothes, but I noticed something that for some reason hadn't dawned on me when watching the empty suit. It was, to put it quite simply, impossible, and I must have approached it from a hundred different angles trying to make sense of it.

The Earth was gone.

At first I assumed it must have been an orientation change, but that didn't make any sense. The planet below had never been hidden from my position before and if we shifted that radically I would have felt it, I was sure.

But still the fact remained that where the Earth should have been, there was empty, dark space. I must have watched for hours waiting to see the sun. We were definitely still moving, and from what I could tell we still seemed to be moving in *some* sort of orbit, but without a planet below I have no idea why we kept the same pattern. Regardless, the sun should have been visible sooner or later.

After two days of waiting, I finally accepted the sun and the moon had gone as well.

It wasn't completely empty out there. Far off in the distance I could still see stars twinkling. Probably long dead, but I knew that there was nothing they could do to save me.

At some point on the first day, I remembered the camera. I focused my attention on it and began to scream and shout for help, in the

vain hope that someone might be watching a feed of it and be able to make contact. I cried and begged and pleaded with that camera for almost four hours before I was suddenly struck by a terrifying thought.

I floated over to it and gently took hold of the cables that were fed out from the back into the wall. I followed them along, looking for where they connected the power or broadcasting apparatus. What I found instead were a pair of neatly severed wires.

Transmitting nothing. Powering nothing. Connected to nothing.

The camera had never even been turned on, and had certainly not been transmitting anything to Earth. So what data had they been collecting?

I still have no idea the answer to that question, but I did feel like I gained some small sliver of control back after spending an all-too-brief hour smashing up the camera.

After that, it was time to break out the code and get the door to the rest of the satellite open. I had decided that even if this somehow was simply a really elaborate and convincing trick to examine reactions to certain stimulus in a test environment, it was still far beyond what I had signed up for. One way or another I decided I was getting out of this damned experiment.

I opened the small safe that contained the passcode document and easily broke the seal on its container. I was desperate to get out of that door as soon as possible and took a few moments to memorize

it.

E109GHT8.

I can still remember it vividly as I entered that code over and over in an attempt to get that locked door to open. Each time I painstakingly entered it with as much precision as I still had within me, and each time the password field read out what I had apparently typed in:

“No one is coming”

and the door remained closed.

And that was it. I was trapped alone in a tiny room floating in space deserted empty space. I had plenty of food and water so starvation wasn’t a danger, but sometime in the first week the clock stopped working.

With no timepiece and nothing left outside of the sun or moon keeping any sort of time at all became utterly impossible. If I had to guess how long I spent in that strange exile, I would say somewhere between three and six months. But that is based solely on my eating and sleeping patterns, which were largely fueled by despair and that quiet aching terror of being utterly forsaken. I couldn’t even read my books or watch anything as characters seemed dead and lifeless, the emptiness of their artificial existence made plain to me.

The hallucinations stopped. I did not even get the comfort of company in my delusions, though at some point the line between

dreaming and reality seemed to blur. I'd be sleeping, strapped into my bed in the middle of the void, or at the same time floating through ancient graveyards, or the open empty sea. They weren't hallucinations, though they were dreams, even if the cold did seem to seep out of them and into the bones of me.

I spent so long trying to get that door open, but nothing worked. The mechanisms and electronics were not accessible from my side. When I finally stopped trying it was the final abandoning of my hope. That was also when I noticed something else that alarmed me in a very different way.

I did some calculations and realized that my food and water levels did not seem to be depleting. For all the time I had been there, in what I could now only think of as my imprisonment, it did not seem like there had been any significant change in my supplies. No one could be restocking me, because there was no one but me there. The food remained static, then did that mean I could remain trapped in this place for the rest of my life, assuming I even still aged?

I began to very seriously consider the idea that I had died, and this was Hell. Given that worry, the way I finally escaped it could be considered ironic. I starved myself to death. Well, not to death, I suppose, given I'm alive enough to talk to you, but close enough.

I don't know how long I just floated there strapped into my lonely cocoon of a bed, refusing to eat or drink, waiting for the end. After everything else, I had no guarantee it was even possible for me to

die but I had to try. When I finally faded from consciousness for what I hoped was the last time, it was the greatest relief I have ever felt.

I don't know exactly when I realized I wasn't dead. There were various moments I faded back into consciousness and I know that I felt the re-entry very hard. But it is difficult to pin down clear thoughts before the hospital.

No one's really given me an official account of what happened, aside from that it became known I was in serious danger of death, and my colleagues on the Daedalus retrieved me, and managed to keep me alive until the next opportunity to send me back down.

I'm not pushing to know more, not really. I know what happened. And no rational cover story that they could feed me is going to change it.

I haven't followed up with Conrad and as far as I'm aware he hasn't made any attempt to contact me. I was paid in full though, which was a surprise.

I wanted to tell someone what really happened for almost a year before I found your Institute. There's nothing really to be done about it, I wanted to get it off my chest.

So thank you for letting me get it down on paper.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

While there's plenty of media coverage of the launch of the Daedalus satellite in early 2007 by Stratosphere Group, a consortium of various scientific and aerospace companies, it seems the actual operation of the facility is guarded with a great deal more secrecy by the various organizations involved.

Martin was able to confirm that during its two years of operation it did have a total of three staff on board: Yan Kilbride, Manuela Dominguez, and Mr. Chilcott.

Beyond that, however, there's little that can be retrieved from beyond the wall of corporate bureaucracy. Tim was, however, able to get a list of the businesses involved in the venture.

Three names stand out: Pinnacle Aerospace, majority owned by the Fairchild family; a large private investment by Nathaniel Lukas; and Optic Solutions Limited, a relatively benign-seeming company manufacturing specialist cameras for research and industrial application, who are nonetheless notable for having their business address listed as being in Ny Alesund in Norway.

I fear, however, that's as much digging as I can do at the moment without drawing attention, so it may be wise to let the matter drop.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

NOT!SASHA

John?

ARCHIVIST

Um…

NOT!SASHA

What are you doing?

ARCHIVIST

Sash – um, I can't seem to find a new file for the Hill Top Road case. I thought I gave it to you to follow up on the children?

NOT!SASHA

You did and I gave it back.

ARCHIVIST

Ah, right.

NOT!SASHA

Even if I hadn't, I would very much prefer it if you stay out of my desk.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, of course, sorry. I didn't realize you were still here or I would have asked.

NOT!SASHA

Of course.

ARCHIVIST

I'll see if it's with Tim then.

NOT!SASHA

Also, John. I have asked before.

ARCHIVIST

What?

NOT!SASHA

Please don't record our conversations.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Stupid. I thought Sasha had left for the evening. I wanted to have a look in her desk for anything that might shed light on her recent weird behavior. I didn't get much of a chance, but it all looked normal, except there are a few scraps of torn paper. They could be from files or just torn scrap paper, it's hard to tell.

I'm at a loss. Why she would want to destroy files, though? Still I think I probably need to back off from Sasha for a while after this. I'll just keep an eye from a distance for now.

I did find several pictures of her and her new boyfriend, though, which puts my mind somewhat at ease.

Well, mostly. There's something about him that doesn't seem quite right. Something about the smile, maybe.

I, I mean they're all pictures of Sasha and Tom, as I'm told his name is, having fun together, but – it's hard to put into words, exactly, but every one of them looks somehow like a stock photo.

End supplement.

[CLICK]

MAG058 – Trail Rations

Statement #8450512

ARCHIVIST

Unsigned statement regarding potential cannibalism while attempting to travel the Oregon Trail. Original letter dated November the 10th, 1845. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, head archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I have accepted I shall not survive this. The cold bites through my skin and feels as though it cuts into my very soul, and I am so hungry that I can barely stand. But I shall not give in. I can hear him taunting me still. Tempting me. But I shall choose to die rather than take part in such an unholy meal. Nor shall I take my own life, whatever extremity my suffering may reach. I am certain my final reward will come soon, and I shall face my savior with a clear conscience and a heart full of faith. Pastor Lawrence once told me that there are no empty bellies in heaven, and I am sure that he is right.

I wonder if I shall see Benjamin there. I should hope so, for all his faults and his incessant chatter. And together with all those we have

lost, I am sure we shall look down upon perdition, and watch Eustace Wick writhing in agony among the well-earned flames.

Speaking of flames, I must apologize about the state of the paper to whoever may be discovering this message. I'm having to write this close to what fire there is, both for light and to stop the ink from freezing. There will likely be some scorching but I should hope it remains legible.

We should never have attempted the Oregon Trail. I see that now. I should have stayed in Savannah and built what life I could, maybe accepted the proposal of Adam Hawthorne. He was a decade my senior, but I heard no complaints from his previous wife while she lived, and it would have been a better fate than to freeze to death in these mountains, listening to Benjamin's incessant taunting.

But my life before had been hardship and travel, and there was a part of my soul that felt that such a thing was simply my lot. So when my father joined my mother in Heaven not three years after moving us to the small town of Savannah, Missouri, it felt as though moving again was what the good Lord intended for me.

It was then, as I had to choose between trying to scrape a living from 20 acres of Missouri soil that my father had left me, or forge out on my own, that Benjamin Carlisle kindly asked permission to repair his wagon on my land. I will not deny he was a handsome man. Even now, the cold has preserved that pleasing cast of his face, gaunt though he may be. I was somewhat taken with him, but had no further thoughts about it, being somewhat plain in my own

appearance. It took me quite aback when I brought a jug of water to his fire that evening, and he asked me directly if there was anywhere in the town of Savannah where he might find a wife.

Well, this seemed to me something of a strange request, though I myself knew little of courting. Benjamin explained that he was set to be travelling up out of some joseph along the Oregon trail towards Willamette Valley, a lush paradise of the frontier. The settlers of Oregon country, he said, had offered land to those who might follow. 320 acres of land for the unmarried, he said, but a married settler could claim 640 acres. That, and the prospect of another pair of hands to help with the work of farming, was a great incentive.

All told, he said, if he was able to find himself a wife before he reached Oregon country, he very much intended to do so. Well, after he told me this, I explained my situation to him, and we were married by Pastor Lawrence the following day. Even now I can't fully bring myself to regret that part of the events that led me here, and had we reached the Willamette Valley as planned, I believe we would have been far happier than most.

I had few real possessions to pack and little food left, but I took what I could into Benjamin's wagon. It was late May when we began our trip, and had I known more about the route we were to take, I might have known that this was dangerously late to be starting such an expedition. But I did not.

In many ways, Benjamin was as impulsive in his travel plans as he

was in choosing a wife, and it was only after we had been on the road for some time that I realized how ill-prepared he for many of the hardships of the trail. I never asked him exactly where he was from, or why he wished to settle in Oregon. Those few times I broached the subject, he would talk all sorts of circles around it, and I had some inkling that he might have been fleeing trouble back east. I never pressed the matter. I had a lot of gratitude to him for taking me along, sharing his food and his bed with me, and rescuing me, as I saw it, from a life of grief and Missouri dirt.

It became apparent as we traveled the blessings were not entirely one-sided. It turned out I was far more suited to the hardships of the trail than him, and far more skilled at keeping the wagon moving than he was. I nursed him through a fever as we crossed through Colorado, and more than once I even managed to avoid an attack by natives, securing the wagon in small ravine until the war party had passed by. All told, I feel I more than earned my bacon.

I still remember the first time Benjamin saw skulls near our campsite, those travelers before us who had not fared as well as we had. Poor man almost fainted. And I could not help but reflect that, were it not for me, he would likely have joined those poor departed souls. I decided not to share that particular reflection.

We reached the Laramie River and Fort John in October. It was a squalid little fur trading post in Wyoming, with thick wooden walls that were solid enough to keep out any war-minded natives, and there were all the signs that a great many people had recently passed through the place.

The manager, an officious man, who introduced himself as Bruce, told us that we had missed the chance to safely cross the Rockies, that the passes would be snowed up within the month. He said we could winter at Fort John if we had the food and money for it or we could turn round and leave. From his tone of voice, it sounded like he had not much care for which of the options we chose.

We were of course devastated and spent several days discussing our options and trying to make a decision as to the wisest course of action, though we knew that for every hour we spent in such conference our choices became fewer and the consequences sharper.

It was at that point we were approached by a man who introduced himself as Eustace Wick. He was a short, squat figure, broad of shoulder and with the rough, dark skin of one who has spent most of his life under the sun's unforgiving glare. His long, shaggy beard was shot through with gray, but his eyes sparkled with a cunning and intelligence I would not have expected to see from such an unkempt face. He also possessed one other attribute which surprised me, though in hindsight it takes on a somewhat sinister light – he had in his mouth a full and healthy set of teeth.

Now, Mr. Eustace Wick inquired as to our purpose in Fort John and, speaking far more candidly than I was truly comfortable with, Benjamin explained to him our journey and our dilemma. But at the mention of the words Willamette Valley, the short man's eyes lit up and a smile practically split his face in two for he was, so he said, the best guide since Sacagawea and could get us through the Rockies long before the snows hit with any force… for a price.

When he said this, he smiled and all the square and shining teeth in his mouth seemed to catch the light.

I was hesitant as I'd met plenty of hucksters and bandits who were keen to pass themselves off as guides and as Benjamin haggled the price my misgivings grew, for Eustace Wick seemed offer little in the way of resistance and we secured his services for only twenty dollars. Plenty of money to be sure, but for the services he was offering and the dangers involved it was practically nothing.

Unfortunately for all my consternation it soon became clear that Benjamin had made up his mind to hire the man. To be fair to him, we did not have the resources to winter in Fort John, and were we to try and make our way back, there was every possibility the weather would still turn deadly on us. We were caught between the devil and the sea, and Benjamin had determined that, guided by Eustace Wick, we were going to try and swim. The poor fool had no idea the devil was the one leading us into the water.

Nobody tried to stop us leaving, though it was clear from the looks upon them they believed us to be dead already. My own hopes were scarce higher, but the little man who now rode with the scaffold and joked as we traveled, keeping Benjamin in higher spirits than I had seen him in months. This began to fade as the cold air began to hit us and the paths through the rockies became steeper and narrower. The journey was hard but we pushed on for almost a week.

Eustace Wick seemed to be as good as his word, keeping us on those

trails that the wagon could use without too much danger. The cold robbed us of sleep, though, and after those first days, the once beautiful vistas and rolling peaks of the mountains seemed to become jagged and vile ribs jutting from the carcass of the world and picked clean by vultures.

Benjamin became quiet. I became sullen. Eustace Wick became more aggravatingly jovial than before, and by the time the first snowflakes began to fall he was practically hooting with joy. My suspicions about his motives had begun to freeze into an icicle within my chest, hard and focused.

When we woke up one morning a week and a half into the journey to find one of our wagons wheels smashed and destroyed beyond repair, I could not find it in myself to be surprised. The snow was falling thickly by this point. We had already used all our replacement wheels over the many months of the journey. We were trapped there and we would surely die.

It was then that Eustace Wick appeared standing on a nearby rock that same big grin on his face. He told us that there looked to be a snowstorm coming but he had found a nearby cave where we could wait it out. He didn't even pretend dismay of the state of the wagon. Benjamin and I followed him, and sure enough, there in the side of the mountain was a shallow but well hidden cave.

It's hard to say at exactly what point I realized specifically that Eustace Wick was planning to eat us. It may have been that he made no mention of retrieving any food from the wagon when he

led us to his den. It could have been the piles of firewood already neatly stacked up against the far wall cut into logs. It might just have been the way he looked at Benjamin with his square white teeth bared an unearthly smile.

But somewhere between the wagon and the cave I became convinced that our so-called guide but lured us up here with no intention short of killing us and eating our flesh. I had no time to communicate this thought to my husband however who still seemed woefully oblivious of the situation, and once we were inside the small cave there was no privacy in which to discuss it.

So I just had to sit there, watching Eustace Wick building a fire as Benjamin tried to suppress his shivers and make conversation with the man who he still did not realize had turned from our guide into our captor. I simply watched and waited as the storm began to descend outside, and the warmth of the fire was quickly overcome by the icy chill of the wind.

Night began to fall. The fire was the only light casting along dancing shadows upon the walls behind us. I could feel hunger gnawing at me and was sure that I was not the only one, but I had a strange thought that the bearded man squatting on the other side of the flames was waiting for someone to mention it, so I refused to do so. My husband of course had no such reservations, and began to bemoan our forgetfulness at leaving what little food we still had in the wagon.

Of this Eustace Wick's smile, if it were even possible, got wider and

he said that we had all the food we needed. He stared into the fire and began to mutter something. It sounded like a prayer. I think he was in his own demented way saying grace.

I remember the words exactly. He locked eyes with Benjamin and said, “Come, meat. Be my guest. And let thy gifts to me be blessed.”

As he said this, a silence fell across the cave. The wind died and the shadows on the wall stopped moving, as though they were watching the scene in rapt attention. Eustace Wick withdrew a long, sharp knife and stalked over to Benjamin, who made no move to defend himself. His eyes were wide, staring at the mad cannibal approaching him with a look of both fear and rapture. The whole scene was so utterly unreal that it took me almost a full second to remember and draw my gun.

All through this journey I had kept my father’s camp locked pistol hidden tucked inside my crinoline. Benjamin knew about it of course, but had obviously never mentioned it to Eustace. Had I had a possibility of reloading it I might have drawn it earlier but with only a single shot, and I a barely passable shooter, I knew that I needed to be sure of my moment.

As it turned out, I left it too late, for even as I placed the barrel to the temple of the foul murderer and pulled the trigger he drew the blade across my husband’s throat. There was a terrific bang, a splash of brain, and a spray of blood. The two men fell dead upon the floor and I found myself alone in the silence of the icy night. I’m sure I need not tell you the tears that I shed that night. Tears that

were ice even before they touched the ground. I wept for my beautiful, stupid Benjamin and I wept for my own life, now most certainly lost at the cold and snow, and to hunger.

It was as this last thought passed unbidden through my mind that I heard it. Very faint, calling softly. The sound of Benjamin's voice.

I called over to him, for a second overjoyed that he might be alive, but as soon as I touched his ice-cold skin already beginning to turn blue I knew that it could not be so. Despite this, his head began to turn towards me and his frozen eyes opened. His lips parted above the gaping red slash across his throat and he spoke.

"Eat me," he said.

I leapt back, shaking my head, praying the Lord to rid me of these terrible visions, but his voice came again clearer and louder, this time begging me attend to eat him. He told me how good he would taste, better than any salted pork. I could cook him over the fire, he said, and the cold would keep him fresh for as long as I needed. I yelled at him, screamed at him to be quiet, for whatever devil had taken up inside to go back to hell, but it made no difference. Still he pleaded to be eaten.

It has been five days now and Benjamin still entreats me. He taunts and curses me by turns, calls me a coward who would rather die than be part of something greater than myself. The entrance to the cave has all but blocked with snow and even if I were to dig my way out there is nowhere for me to go. I don't even know where

whatever's left of the wagon would be. I think I might try, though, now I have finished this account of the events that led up to my fate.

I hope whoever finds this does not judge us too harshly. We were simply seeking a better life. I leave this here in the oilskins of Eustace Wick in the hopes it may be protected from the depredations of winter. As for myself, I will try to dig my way out and get as far as I can.

I will not survive, but I hope the Lord understands it is not suicide. It is simply that I can no longer stand to be trapped here, where the corpse of my husband begs me to make it meat.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Certainly a grotesque tale, but I don't have access to the sort of information required to verify any of the details provided by the unnamed Mrs. Carlisle. There is no record of any Eustace Wick that I could find. There is a Benjamin Carlisle mentioned in the 1838 census of Burke County, North Carolina, but that's about it.

The prayer apparently spoken by Mr. Wick is a perversion of the old Lutheran grace: "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let thy gifts to us be blessed". There was a noted Lutheran preacher by the name of Horatio Wick that is mentioned briefly in several histories of

Massachusetts as rather violently falling out with his colleagues in the church, the Sacrament of the Eucharist, but he apparently drowned in 1832.

What interests me most is how this unsigned letter, if it is to be believed, made its way from an icebound cave in Wyoming or Idaho all the way to the personal collection of Jonah Magnus.

End recording.

[MUFFLED VOICES FROM A HALLWAY]

TIM

Look, I tried talking to Elias about it. It doesn't seem to be doing good.

MARTIN

He's under a lot of pressure. You know how messed up he's been since Prentiss.

TIM

How messed up *he's* been!?

MARTIN

[quickly] Of course, I'm sorry, sorry, I didn't mean that you weren't, just

TIM

No! Because I didn't start stalking my coworkers.

MARTIN

Maybe try talking to him.

TIM

Sure, like he doesn't already look at me like I'm a murderer.

MARTIN

Look, we just gotta let him work through this. I suggested therapy but he just says no.

TIM

Well, we need to do *something*.

MARTIN

Yeah, maybe.

The preceding conversation was overheard on the 19th of November, 2016. It reaffirms my current worries about Tim, though does go some way to reassure me that Martin is unlikely to be the culprit, especially following our earlier conversation.

[sigh] I need to be more careful.

MAG059 - Recluse

Statement #0052911

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Ronald Sinclair, regarding his years spent in a teenage halfway house on Hill Top Road, Oxford. Original statement given November 29th, 2005. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I should have come in to tell you people about this before, really. I heard about your institute back in the 80s, and I thought, “should I tell them?” But I didn’t. Thought you’d be all about old castles and ancient cairns, not have any time for weird goings-on in a suburban house in Oxford. And you’re academics as well so probably have more rigorous standards than one crackpot’s horror story.

Still, I saw last week that they were planning to build on that land again. Another house where the old Fielding place used to be. I don’t know, it’s not like you’d have any power to stop the construction, but I just… I needed to tell someone about it. And you

were less likely to throw me out on my ear than the Planning Department of Oxford City Council.

You see, I lived with Raymond Fielding for almost three years, and believe me when I say that there is nothing good that can come from disturbing that dreadful place.

I was a bad kid. I've cleaned up my act in the 40-odd years since, but back then I was a little thug. Wasn't entirely my fault – I came from a bad family. My father left before I was born, and I'm not sure how much you know about single motherhood in the late 40s, but it was clearly hard enough that my mother ended up with a serious alcohol problem.

I won't go into the gory details of my childhood, but let's just say it's no surprise I was out of school and in the system before my 13th birthday. They tried a few places to set me straight. Back then these sort of places weren't quite as enlightened, and the only life lesson I learned worth a damn was how to take a beating.

Finally, when I was 15, after the justice system was finished with me for the third time, I was given the chance to reenter society, and offered a place at a halfway house on Hill Top Road.

It's weird. I've tried to get information on it so many times in the years since, but there's nothing there. It's like it never existed. I mean, this was a long way pre-digital, and files got lost plenty, but it still bothers me. The most traumatic thing that ever happened to me, and as far as any official record is concerned, I couldn't have

even been there.

Raymond Fielding was younger than I expected. Every other place, the people in charge had been old, leathery moralists with scowls on their faces and calluses on their knuckles. A lot of ex-military types who would lecture for hours on how their wasted life had been saved by the discipline of the army, and did their best to impose it on us.

Ray, as he insisted we call him, was different. He couldn't have been much older than 30, and he let his brown hair grow long – not by today's standards, I suppose, but it would have sent any of the crew-cut authoritarians into a red-faced rage. He was friendly and approachable, but didn't seem like he was trying to be our friend. He was easygoing and smiled a lot. But there was something in his eyes that made me wary of trying to take advantage of him.

I didn't like him from the start. The other adults I'd met on my journey through delinquency had been awful, and they'd run the spectrum from drippy, patronizing do-gooders to abusive thugs, but I'd always *known.* I would know what they were and where I stood with them. Ray was a mystery, and that unsettled me. Still, he wasn't too strict with our comings and goings, and the other kids staying there seemed all right.

The one thing that surprised me was how rare it was to see anyone come back. Most other halfway houses I'd stayed in, you always had some of the older residents, those who had fallen into even worse criminal company, coming back occasionally, usually to sell drugs

or do some recruiting.

Amphetamines were the thing back in the early 60s, so I was surprised when I moved into Hill Top Road and there wasn't a purple Heart or a black bomber to be found. It didn't seem like any alumni of Ray's little family came back for a visit.

At the time, I just assumed it was a pretty nice neighborhood, so probably wasn't the sort of place my kind – as I thought of it then – made a habit of visiting. I wasn't wrong. The local residents hated us. We never really got into any proper trouble, but the sort of glares we got just for smoking on the street made me want to break a window sometimes.

I never did, though. I'm… not quite sure why I didn't. To be honest, before I met Ray, I would have. There were plenty of broken windows in my past. There was something about living there, though, that dulled the urge.

My memories of a lot of my time there are, well, not exactly foggy, but feel almost like I'm watching someone else's memories. I remember that it sometimes felt like I'd do things without actually deciding to do them. Like it was just muscle memory moving me, or a string gently guiding me.

It was never bad or dangerous stuff, just… things I wouldn't normally have done, like brushing my teeth. I'm glad for it now I've passed 60, and teeth have stopped being something I take for granted. But at 15 the thought never even crossed my mind. But

when I lived on Hill Top Road, I cleaned them every night, up and down and side to side, my arm moving like I didn't even need to think about it.

The other kids living there were the same. At least, I *think* they were. I remember them being kind of dull – not that they were boring, exactly; we'd spend time together, and smoke and play games and the like. But there was something about them. As though there were some things that *they* said and did without anything behind them.

Occasionally, there'd be flashes of something. Like the time me and Dick Barrowdale snuck out after dark and set Mr. Hainsley's bins on fire. But mostly they were quiet, almost placid. I'm sure they'd have said the same things about me, but at the time, nothing seemed amiss. I did what I did because it was what I was supposed to do. It never struck me to question it. I'm not sure I really recognize who I became while living at that house.

I did take up reading, though. There was a shop down in Kerry that kept a bucket of old pulp magazines marked down to 6 pence because they weren't the latest issue. I used to spend whatever money I had down there, and then I'd sit under the tree in the back garden and read them cover to cover, over and over again. They were daft, really, but I loved them. In the summer, with the leaves giving you just enough shade to keep cool, I'd say I was happier than I'd ever been before then.

For the most part, Ray seemed content to stay out of our hair and

leave us to our own devices. He had his own study in the basement, where he spent almost all his time, and usually trusted one of us to go to the grocer's for food and sundries. Aside from church, which he made us attend with him every Sunday, he rarely went out at all. Occasionally, one of the other residents of the neighborhood would overcome their distaste for us long enough to ask how Ray was keeping, and whether he was well.

I gradually got the sense that, with the exception of the teenagers staying at his house, Raymond Fielding was something of a recluse. A well-liked recluse, certainly, but to see him leave the house on any day other than a Sunday was quite a remarkable thing.

Aside from church, there was one other regular activity that he always insisted we take part in. We generally ate our meals in the dining room – which was a bit cramped sometimes, as, when full, there were eight of us in the house aside from Ray, and the table was barely big enough.

On Sunday evenings, however, we'd all gather for the evening meal, and before we sat down to eat, he would remove the bright white tablecloth that covered it, and we'd gather around the dark wood. I remember it was carved in all sorts of strange swirling designs and patterns. It felt like if you picked a line, any line, you could follow it through to the center, to some deep truth, if only your eye could keep track of the strands that had caught it.

The center of the table looked, at first, like it was simply part of the wooden top, but if you looked closely, as I did so often, you could

see an outline marking the very middle as a small, square box, carved with patterns just like the ones that laced their way over the rest of the table. I don't remember how long we sat around the table those evenings, nor do I have any memory of what we might have eaten.

So I passed a couple of years in relative peace. I actually studied, stayed mostly out of trouble, and, as my 18th birthday approached, it looked like I might be able to find someone to teach me a decent trade. At that point, I was the oldest there by a few months, the others having left the house as they each turned 18 in turn. A suited man would come around – though, rarely the same one twice – Ray would sign some papers, and my former house sibling would head out the door and into the wide world. I didn't see them after that, but at the time I didn't really think anything of it. I assumed they were too busy trying to survive in a world that I had always considered deeply hostile.

Agnes came to the house two months before my birthday, in the middle of winter. Ray had never mentioned her, never held one of his little meetings to introduce her. She was just suddenly in the house one day, and no one really thought to question it. She was younger than the other kids, maybe ten or eleven years old. Didn't talk much. She had a small, sharp face, and long brown hair, always braided into two tight pigtails, which she would twirl around her fingers whenever you tried to talk to her. I'll admit, she was a *bit* spooky, looking back on it, but to be honest at the time I never really questioned it, the same way I never really questioned any of

it.

She never came to church, though. Never sat around the dinner table when it was uncovered. Whenever Ray came in the room and she was in there, he would often just turn around and leave. And once, I could have sworn that he looked at her with something in his eyes that, even in my dull state, I recognized as fear.

I was so focused on my upcoming emancipation that I didn't pay much attention to these developments, and I can't tell you much more about Agnes, or what she did with her time in the house. All I know is that, when the man from the Children's Committee came with the papers for Ray to sign, she was standing at the bottom of the stairs, watching me with an expression that looked almost playful.

Ray signed the documents to remand me fully back to state custody. The age of majority back then was twenty-one, but from eighteen I was expected to be finding work and accommodation on my own. It was all a bit surreal, watching pens sign my life into its different stages without holding any of them myself.

As the man in the suit told me to follow him in a clipped BBC accent, Agnes walked over, and gestured for me to lean down and listen to her. I did so, but instead of a conspiratorial whisper, she just gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, then ran off down the hall. I stood there for a moment, confused, before my temporary guardian once again instructed me to follow him.

I did so, and the cold air of the outside hit me like a slap across the face. We walked for a few minutes to the end of the road, and I felt as though my meager suitcase was almost frozen to my hand. He told me to wait there while he brought his car around, then disappeared down a side street.

I stood there as the bitter wind cut through my thin coat. The sun was out, but it didn't do much to soften the sharpness of the February air as I waited.

Then, without warning, I wasn't waiting anymore. I had turned around, put down my suitcase, and started walking back toward Raymond Fielding's house. I didn't *want* to go back. I had no reason to go back, but I had apparently decided to, anyway, because I knew that's where I was going.

After two and a half years, I was rather used to this feeling, but there was something else there this time. Something in the back of my mind, a frantic, scuttling terror. It didn't do any good, though. I was returning to Hill Top Road, no matter what I might feel about it. Choice didn't even come into it.

The door was unlocked when I returned, and the house was quiet. My eyes darted around, looking for anyone who might be able to tell me what was going on, why the fine threads that pulled me through my life had dragged me back here. But I was alone. I walked over to the door that led down into the basement, into Ray's study, and I was suddenly struck by the realization that nobody other than him had ever gone inside. At least, not to my knowledge.

Nonetheless, I reached up and turned the handle, twisted silently, and the door swung open, revealing a set of stairs leading down. Lightbulbs in spherical lampshades lit the way, and the thought struck me that, given how much time Ray spent down here, it was surprising how many cobwebs there were. They covered every corner, and lightly coated part of the walls. As I headed down the stairs, closing the door behind me, I saw even more, and came to the unsettling realization that what covered the bare bulbs were not in fact lampshades, but were instead thick clumps of cobweb.

The sight that greeted me when I finally reached the bottom of the stairs was about as far from what I had expected as it could possibly have been. Rather than a study filled with books, papers, desks, or the like, the room was large, and almost empty. The walls and ceiling were bare earth, and it looked more like a burrow than anything else.

In the center of the room stood that strange hypnotic table, though how he had gotten the heavy wooden thing down here was beyond me. The whole place was covered with a thick gossamer of spider's web, and in the thick clumps around the edges of the chamber I saw shapes I recognised.

Doris Hardy. Dick Barrowdale. Greg Montgomery. The older ones who had left the house before I had.

They lay still now, wrapped in their sticky cocoons. Their bodies seemed warped and bloated in a way I didn't recognize. But that's only because at that point in my life, I had never before seen a

spider egg sac.

In the chair sat Raymond Fielding. He looked the same as ever, that placid, unreadable smile still on his face. His brown leather coat seemed to shift around his body. The texture in the dim light seemed more like coarse fur.

He didn't say anything, just watched as I continued to make my way towards the table. For all the terror strangling my heart at that moment at the discovery of the grotesque fate of my friends, I could still feel the bland, uncaring expression on my face, and found myself stood in front of the table as though nothing whatsoever was wrong.

I reached over and pulled the wooden square from the center of the table. On its own, it appeared to be a small wooden box, and the lid opened smoothly, as my hands moved in a practiced motion. Inside was an apple, green and fresh and still wet with morning dew.

I knew I was going to eat it. I could feel tears desperately trying to push themselves out of my eyes, but I instead decided not to cry. I placed the box down on the table, reached over, and picked up the apple.

All at once, my cheek erupted in pain. It was like someone had pressed a hot branding iron into my face, and I could swear that I heard the flesh sizzle as I let out a scream and fell to my knees.

I raised my hands to my face and realized in that moment two very important things. The first is that my face seemed to be untouched;

I could feel no injury or burn. The second was that raising my hand had been a truly voluntary act. I had willed it myself, and whatever power had been gripping me, tugging me into its web, I was free of it.

I looked at Raymond Fielding, whose face finally had a *real* expression on it – one of confusion and anger. As he stood up, I saw small, twitching shapes tumbling out of his jacket, and I ran. I ran up those stairs, out the door, and away into the night. I didn't look back, and to this day, I pray every night that the others down in the basement were already dead.

That's it, really. Within two hours, I was out of Oxford, on the first train I could jump onto. I jumped off at Birmingham to avoid a ticket inspector. And that's where I spent the next several years. Given my start in life, I've done very well for myself. I now have comfort, education, and money. I try to think that I've left my past behind, but that sort of denial doesn't help me sleep. I only had my first truly restful night since that day after reading about the fire that burned the house to the ground.

But now they're building there. They're breaking ground that should be left burned and empty. And I've started to dream again.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Mr. Sinclair was not exaggerating when he described the difficulties of tracking down information on any youth halfway house in Hill

Top Road. Or Raymond Fielding more generally.

While I am naturally inclined to suspect conspiracy, Martin informs me that the nature of the gaps look like lost or damaged files. There are whole swathes of records missing from that period, not only related to Fielding, but many other similar institutions in the area. There's no attempt to cover up or redirect it, either. It just looks like whichever cabinet housed those records got lost or damaged in the years since.

I have done my best to prevent Martin reading this statement in too much detail. I have no interest in having another argument about spiders. In fact, after reading this statement, I have no interest in thinking about spiders any more than is professionally required.

It raises further questions about the relationship between Raymond Fielding and this Agnes. I can only hope some answers lie elsewhere in the Archives. I wouldn't be surprised. Between Ronald Sinclair, Ivo Lensik, and Father Burroughs, it appears there's still much to learn about Hill Top Road.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

Everyone’s avoiding me. They’ve taken to working farther away from me than normal, and when I call them for any reason, they’re always keen to leave as soon as possible. They share furtive glances when they think I’m not looking. I don’t like it. I feel like they’re planning something.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG060 – The Observer Effect

Statement #9721207

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Rosa Meyer, concerning a persistent feeling of being watched. Original statement given July 12, 1972. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

It's still there, still watching me. There's nowhere I can go, a place I can hide that it doesn't keep looking at me. I don't know why. No idea what it wants from me, or if it ever had any plans beyond just staring from wherever it is hiding. I can't eat, I can't sleep, it's been months now, and it's still *there*.

You can't see it, I know. I can't see it either, but that doesn't matter, because it can see me. That's what matters. I can feel its gaze burrowing into the back of my neck. Does it hate me? Does it just want me to keep living in fear? I don't know why this is happening to me.

At first, I thought it was a person, some stalker who just kept hiding. I had this thought that if I kept feeling something was watching me, then it must be a person doing it. There must be someone following me. It's not like I haven't had stalkers before.

I started to scan the faces of everyone I passed, looking to see if I recognized them, if I'd seen them before anywhere. Did I recognize the man in the green overcoat from the bus this morning? Did that bike messenger loop around the road and pass me again? No. They never did. Never. No one was following me. But something was watching. It still is.

A strange thing is, it's a feeling I should be used to. I've been watched by people for years. I present the Look East segment for BBC News almost every day – well, I used to. And on the other end of that camera, there were tens of thousands of people, but I never felt it from them. Sometimes, as I kept my eyes locked on that camera, reeling off the latest string of burglaries, I tried to feel it, tried to imagine all the people seeing me, watching me. Even then, even when I was trying, it was never more than a dead, empty lens. Maybe it's just as well that I never felt it before.

I lost my job within two weeks. This feeling coming over me, I couldn't concentrate, I couldn't look at the camera, I couldn't read the dead, empty words on the page. I ended up having something of an on-air breakdown. I guess it's lucky you're based in London, so you couldn't have seen it.

I know the moment it started. Looking back, it all seems so

arbitrary, like a switch suddenly being clicked on, and all at once my life is destroyed. It was three months ago, in April. I was doing inventory for some of my brother's estate, it was largely up to me to take care of it after his death. My parents were taking it very hard, and weren't well enough themselves to make the journey down to his small house in Southampton to try and organize his meager possessions.

I suppose I wasn't in a good place to begin with. You're not meant to die of a stroke that young. I mean, he was only 38, and he wasn't exactly the healthiest, but it just seemed so unprovoked. I've always been quite religious, and believed that things happened for a reason, blessings ultimately came to the virtuous and misfortune to the wicked, but now I don't know.

Perhaps you could say that my curiosity was the fault that brought this on me? But I didn't open the box because I was curious, I opened it because I had to in order to fully inventory my dead brother's possessions. I honestly don't think that's a transgression. It wasn't even marked as special – no oak chests or triple-locked brass boxes, just another brown cardboard box like any other.

I don't think that anything about it struck me as special? Looking back, I feel like it marked itself, that it drew my eye, and I would stare at it for longer than the other boxes piled up around his house. The place was so quiet, a lonely testament to Christopher's isolation. He'd never married, and there seemed to be nothing in that dingy home that said he had any friends to speak of.

In a lot of ways, it reminded me of my own life. I have friends enough in Norwich, but no family except Christopher and my parents, though I do have my reasons. Still, looking through my late brother's things led to the sort of reflection that makes me uncomfortable, and I was drinking more than I normally would.

It was my second day down there when I opened the box. I'd been going through all his old document boxes, and there were a lot. Christopher had worked for the history department at the University of Southampton. I don't know what he specialized in – we never really talked about his work – but based on what I found in his study, he'd written a few books on the subject of ancient myths and fetishes, those objects that were believed by various cultures to have supernatural or religious power imbued within them.

His first book was on the holy cross of Christianity, and how it operates as a fetish within our culture. This offended me a little bit – I was worried he was trivializing a faith that, as far as I knew, he shared with me. Still, I tried to read a chapter of it on the use of the cross in the vampire myth, but it was very dry and, quite frankly, a bit dull. Most of the boxes were similar, full of notes and clippings and bits of research that meant absolutely nothing to me. I put these aside to check with Angus Cartwright, one of Christopher's colleagues who I had contacted to have a look at what papers of his I couldn't understand.

Some of the boxes, however, contained what I can only assume was practical research: fetish objects and totems from all around the

world, small animal figures carved from bones, strings of glass beads tied together in intricate knotted patterns, grotesque quasi-human statuettes made of wood and old leather. Some of them were more than a little bit unsettling, but only one managed to send me spiraling into the place I am now.

As I said, it was one of the last boxes I opened on the second day. It was late, and I had already made my way through most of a bottle of wine. The more I think about it, the more I think that opening that box felt no different to any of the others. No hard feelings, no smells, nothing. It was just a box empty of everything except a single typewritten note and an old hand mirror.

It lay inside, utterly innocuous. If it was a trap, there was no way to tell.

I picked up the note first. The typing was neat, managed to be completely centered, even though the paper seemed to be a scrap that had been torn from a larger piece. It read, in all capitals:

“BEHIND YOU.”

I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you how unsettling that was. I turned and looked almost before I fully understood what I had read. There was a window behind me, with the view of the street below my brother’s study and the darkening sky above it. There was nothing there though, nobody walking along the street, no cars driving down it, nothing that seemed in any way out of place.

I looked back at the note, shrugged, and reached down for the

mirror. It was a bit heavier than I'd expected, and under a thick layer of tarnish the frame seemed to be gold, or at least gold-plated. The glass itself was a bit grimy, but still seemed to be intact. I have no idea how old it was, or what period it might have been made in. Though I searched the box thoroughly, I couldn't find anything that might explain where Christopher got it.

I looked in the mirror. I was a mess. Hair unwashed, eyes red from crying, lips patchy, stained a bruised purple from the wine. I hadn't really had any time to take care of or even look at myself since I got to Christopher's house, and this ancient hand mirror really showed it.

I sighed, shook my head, and prepared to check the next box when the angle on the mirror shifted in my hand slightly, and I screamed. It now reflected the window behind me, and I could see a face staring in. It was dark outside, and it was almost entirely in shadow, so I couldn't tell you much about the features, but he was huge, seeming to take up most of the window behind me. The only thing about it that I could see with any real clarity were the eyes – bright, shining, bulging eyes, with pupils so dark it made me feel sick, drinking everything in, watching with a greedy intensity. I could feel its gaze burning into the back of my neck, feel its unblinking eyes.

My muscles locked in sudden terror, and the mirror tumbled out of my hand, spinning only once before it hit the floor and shattered into a thousand tiny shards.

Seven years' bad luck, isn't it? Maybe that's it. Maybe I have to feel this horrid, aching panic of the eyes I know are following me for seven years before they finally leave. I hope not. But maybe even that's wishful thinking. Maybe this is now my life forever, and it will never, ever stop.

I've tried to think whether I'd be able to go on if that was the case. I think I'd try, at least until my parents passed away. I couldn't stand for them to lose both children.

Obviously, that was when my real problems began. I could write the face off as a brief but horrid hallucination, but the feeling of being under constant scrutiny and observation isn't something I can explain away so easily. I've considered the possibility that I'm just going insane. Being watched is not an uncommon symptom of psychosis or schizophrenia, and I've been keeping an eye out for the other symptoms, but in all other ways I feel fine. It's true I'm finding it hard to concentrate, but that's only because I can't sleep because they're *watching* me. Those unseen eyes that hover everywhere and won't let me rest.

I'm not mad, I'm sure I'm not mad. I still have what's left of the mirror. It's just a bent gold frame now. I tried to have new glass put in, but the only eyes it showed were mine.

I did talk to Angus, though. He seemed a little bit unnerved by the line of questioning I was pursuing – or maybe just by how intensely I was asking the questions – but he answered me. He didn't recognize the mirror, but a few years ago, Christopher was looking

into writing a book on the totems of what he called “outer cults”, small organized groups of worshippers whose beliefs weren’t simply deviations from paganism or other major religions, but seemed to focus on holy beings or concepts completely apart from what would be considered normal religious practice. Some seemed to have more in common with ancient shamanism than with organized hierarchical worship, and all were highly secretive.

Christopher had apparently collected several artefacts considered holy by certain of these sects, though I could find no details among his documents. Angus couldn’t be sure, but he believed that the mirror might have been one such object. Christopher had apparently abandoned the project about a year before his death, choosing instead to pursue a line of research into Inuit ceremonial carvings.

And here’s where we finally come to why I’m here. Because Angus told me that my brother wasn’t researching alone.

He had apparently logged several trips to London in order to consult with your Institute. I don’t know why or what about, and no one here seems to be able or willing to help me find out, but he was here. I’m not going to rest until I find out why. Not that I could rest anyway.

Those eyes still haunt my dreams and follow me through the waking world, even here. Especially here.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

A bit of an odd one, this. The mid-to-late twentieth century seems marginally better-filed than most of the archives, so we haven't seen as many rogue statements cropping up from that period.

Most of the details from Miss Meyer's statement seem to check out – Sasha got a confirmation from the BBC that she had indeed been one of the anchors for the Look East Evening News between 1970 and 72, until she suffered a nervous breakdown and damaged several cameras in their Norwich studio.

Martin's checking with the University of Southampton also seems to confirm the details of Christopher Meyer's life and death. I even tried to read one or two of his books, but they were a bit dry even for me, and didn't appear to have any particular relevance to the case.

I've been unable to locate any evidence that he made use of the Institute's library or consultation services, but even these days those records aren't kept in as much detail as they really should be, so that doesn't necessarily mean he wasn't here.

What's most interesting is what Tim found out about the final two decades of Miss Meyer's life, before she died in prison in 1993. Following the statement, she apparently spent almost 12 years working low-level service jobs, until both her mother and father passed away of cancer and heart disease respectively.

There's nothing notable about this period in any official records, but

on October the 24th, 1984 she murdered a delivery van driver named Danilo Costich.

She unloaded the van's normal cargo of filing paper and envelopes before filling it with several barrels of petrol. She was apprehended just south of Vauxhall Bridge after she jumped a red light and collided with another car. Luckily, the petrol did not ignite and she was picked up by police as she tried to flee the scene.

Originally charged with reckless driving, it didn't take long for them to connect her to the murder of Mr. Costich, and she was given a sentence of 17 years in HMP Holloway. She died of pneumonia nine years later.

A bizarre and apparently motiveless crime. The one detail that still nags at me is that the company the Danilo Costich worked for, Paper Run Limited, is the same company that at the time supplied most of the stationery to the Magnus Institute. I have a nasty feeling about exactly where she was taking that petrol.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

You don't mind if I record this, I trust?

ELIAS

Well to be honest–

TIM

–that's kind of one of the things we wanted to talk about.

MARTIN

This is an intervention.

ARCHIVIST

Excuse me?

ELIAS

If you'd rather it was an official disciplinary hearing, John, we can arrange it.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Say your piece.

NOT!SASHA

We care about you, John, and you've been rather erratic since the Prentiss incident.

MARTIN

And we'd really like –

ELIAS

To not have to fire you.

MARTIN

To make sure that you're doing okay.

ARCHIVIST

Look, I understand I've been a bit… distant recently.

TIM

You were watching my house.

NOT!SASHA

You followed me on my lunch break and searched my desk.

MARTIN

You said was I lying about a *murder*.

ARCHIVIST

I – that is to say – I –

NOT!SASHA

Do you think we killed Gertrude?

ARCHIVIST

No, it's…

…maybe. Maybe you did, I don't *know* –

ELIAS

John, this is absurd. This goes far beyond an unhealthy work environment. I'll admit it's partly my fault for letting it get this bad, I should have started earlier.

TIM

You still don't believe us, do you?

ARCHIVIST

It's not that I don't believe you it's just – I mean, you could have done it!

TIM

Seriously, listen to yourself.

MARTIN

You're not right.

ARCHIVIST

We've gone a long way beyond *right*, Martin, there are monsters out there, and I don't know who or where they are or if any of you – if you want me to trust you, then I'm sorry, but I need *evidence.*

ELIAS

[sigh] Here.

ARCHIVIST

And this is?

ELIAS

A copy of all the CCTV from the week Gertrude disappeared. The police finally finished cleaning it up and examining it, and returned a copy.

ARCHIVIST

[laughing] There aren't any cameras in the Archive.

ELIAS

But there are everywhere else. Including all of the entrances into the Archive.

And across all of the feeds, it provides a remarkably detailed account of all of our movements over that week. Even yours.

ARCHIVIST

And you think this gives everyone an alibi?

ELIAS

The police certainly do, but feel free to check it yourself.

ARCHIVIST

[tersely] Thank you. I will.

NOT!SASHA

And let's have no more of this paranoia.

[CLICK]

I've been examining the CCTV feeds Elias gave me. It… it does seem to provide everyone with a solid alibi, and no one is seen entering or exiting the archives except Gertrude. At least not before Elias goes down and discovers the blood.

Gertrude's own movements are somewhat erratic, and she seems to be in and out of the Archives at all hours of the day and night, at some points looking rather disheveled.

That could stand closer scrutiny later but for now I… I can't quite figure out whether this exoneration of my colleagues is more of a relief or a frustration.

At the very least it seems I have been… I have been rather unfair to them.

I just hope they haven't entirely lost respect for me.

One thing that does nothing to ease my mind, though, is the renewed significance this puts on the tunnels beneath the Archive, as it seems more and more likely that whoever or whatever is living

down there is the same thing that killed Gertrude.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG061 – Hard Shoulder

Statement #0160112

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

You don't mind if I record this, do you?

DAISY

Knock yourself out.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

DAISY

'course, if anyone else ever hears it…

ARCHIVIST

You'll arrest me.

DAISY

[heh] No.

ARCHIVIST

…Right. Um, so, you came to deliver one of the tapes.

From Basira?

The uh, the, the audio tapes.

…

So… can I have it? Please?

DAISY

I'm thinking.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Um, I thought you needed me to check them?

DAISY

You don't get it, do you?

ARCHIVIST

I-I'm not sure I follow.

DAISY

The tapes. Why she was giving them to you.

ARCHIVIST

She, uh. She wanted my help.

DAISY

[small, exasperated laugh/huff]

ARCHIVIST

You, uh, you didn't have a tape player at your station.

DAISY

She thought you did it.

ARCHIVIST

What?!

DAISY

We both did.

ARCHIVIST

Wait, you thought I killed Gertrude?!

DAISY

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

Whuh – uh – I – *why?*

DAISY

[exasperated laugh/sigh] Look at you: you're obsessed with it, jumpy as hell, and the only person who benefited from her death.

ARCHIVIST

Well uh, I… I mean. I *didn't*.

DAISY

Yeah. I know.

ARCHIVIST

[stressed, exasperated exhalation]

DAISY

Finally got IT to clean up the CCTV for the week she disappeared. No cameras in the archive, but we got plenty of footage of you. Watched your movements that whole week. You didn't kill her.

ARCHIVIST

I don't – what does this have to do with the tapes?

DAISY

Didn't have enough to hold you. Basira was worried you were going to run.

ARCHIVIST

So, what – you fed me a couple of tapes to keep me around?

DAISY

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

And, now you know I'm innocent…?

DAISY

Hm. I reckon we should cut you off, but Basira's soft. She likes you. *[heh]* No idea *why*. Maybe she keeps feeding you tapes, doesn't involve me, I don't plan on seeing or hearing *anything* about it.

ARCHIVIST

Well… thank you, Detective Tonner –

DAISY

Daisy.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you, Daisy.

DAISY

Sure.

ARCHIVIST

…If you don't mind me asking, hhhow long have you been sectioned, now –

DAISY

[angrily] I *do* mind –

…

[quickly] 14 years.

ARCHIVIST

…I don't suppose you'd like to make a statement?

DAISY

[sullen] 'bout what?

ARCHIVIST

Whatever you like. 14 years – you must have seen a *number* of paranormal things.

DAISY

And you want me to tell you about them.

ARCHIVIST

Uh – IIIIII –

DAISY

Okay.

ARCHIVIST

[stammering] What?

DAISY

Okay. I'll give you a statement about – how I got my first Section 31.

…You look surprised.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, I was largely asking as a formality, Basira didn't give the impression you were the sharing sort.

DAISY

Maybe you caught me in a good mood.

ARCHIVIST

Right, well… good. Do you need me to go over our non-disclosure policy –

DAISY

Not as long as you understand my policy: if it gets out, I'll break every bone in your body.

ARCHIVIST

[sigh, muttering] There are worse things that could happen to them…

DAISY

[confused, possibly offended] What?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, nothing. Uh, statement of Detective Alice “Daisy” Tonner of the London Metropolitan Police. What’s the subject?

DAISY

Traffic stop of a delivery van on the M6 near Preston, afternoon of… 24th July, 2002.

ARCHIVIST

Recorded live from subject, 1st December, 2016.

Statement begins.

DAISY (STATEMENT)

This was a long time ago. I’d been police for two years. I wasn’t even with the Met back then. I was based up in Lancashire with a road policing unit. This is before the Highways Agency took most of the grunt work, so there was plenty to do. None of it much fun, but it needed doing. Booking drunk drivers were my favorite. I always hoped they’d refuse the breathalyzer, maybe even took a swing at me. Nothing funnier than a drunk asshole trying to avoid being arrested.

I usually rode with Isaac Masters. He’d been working with the RPU a lot longer than I had, and was even harsher than *me*. I know why, though. He tried to be a good police, give everyone a fair shot, but you see a lot of accidents – not much worse in the world than a

really bad car crash. It *gets* to you. You get hard on people who don't respect the road, and there are plenty of them out there.

It was raining that night, that heavy, thumping rain that means you can't hear a damn thing. It crashes onto the roof like someone's jumpin' on it. Me and Zack was sitting in a lay-by, watching traffic and trying to drink coffee. We'd picked it up from a service station a few miles back, but it was one of those open-topped styrofoam cups. By the time we'd got back to the car, the rain had got in and left us with two cups of cold sludge.

So we were both in a pretty bad mood. It was maybe 1:00 in the afternoon, but you wouldn't have known it. The clouds weren't letting any sun through, and everything looked grey, wet and lifeless. Couldn't even talk over the sound of rain on the roof, so we just sat there in silence, drinking lukewarm sludge.

The motorway was quieter than normal. A Wednesday afternoon doesn't see a lot of traffic, but the rain usually brings out more cars. That day it was pretty empty. Everyone seemed to be driving careful on account of the rain, which was also not normal, and I was torn. Part of me wanted to spot some idiot who I could take my bad mood out on, when the other part of me didn't want to get any wetter than I already was.

It looked like I wasn't gonna get a choice, anyway – at least not until I saw the van. It was a beaten up old Citroën C15. There was some writing on the side, but I couldn't see it clearly through the rain. It was either very dirty, or painted a nasty shade of off-white.

Most importantly, it was driving about 25 miles an hour. The limit is 70. There's technically no minimum speed on a motorway, but the van didn't show any signs of speeding up, and it was kind of strange. We had enough cause to stop it if we wanted. I wasn't sure whether to let it go or not, but Zack had clearly made his decision already. He was in the driving seat and fired up the lights as we drove up behind it.

[FAINT STATIC/VIBRATION BEGINS TO RISE IN BACKGROUND, INITIALLY BARELY-PERCEPTIBLE]

The van glided to a stop on the hard shoulder at the side of the road and sat there. The headlights, which had been turned on for the rain, died. Then it just waited.

Zack was out first. The rain was so thick that he had to take his torch to see properly. The light passed over the van, and I could see rust creeping around the edges of the paneling.

We walked up to the driver's side. I could see dark shapes from inside, but they weren't moving. Up close, I could read the name on the side: "Breekon and Hope Deliveries." It was covered in a thick layer of dirt that the rain couldn't quite wash off.

[OMINOUS MUSICAL TONE. STATIC/VIBRATIONS NOW VERY AUDIBLE.]

Zack knocked on the door and it opened. The man who got out

looked normal – so normal that these days I can't really picture his face. Said his name was "Tom." I wasn't the one looking over his driving licence so I don't know about second names.

From the other side two men climbed out. They were *huge*. Hard faces, like a pair of old stone statues, dressed in overalls and flat caps. They asked what was going on, speaking back and forth in Cockney accents so broad and fake-sounding that I thought they were putting them on for a laugh. I was about to lay into them for it when a sound cut me short.

Zack had been talking to "Tom," who was making some bland explanation for his slow driving – caution, heavy rain, empty road, all that crap. They heard it, too, and he stopped mid-sentence to look at me.

[DEEP, INTENSE BACKGROUND VIBRATIONS CONTINUE]

From the back of the van, there was a sound of moaning. It sounded kind of like a moan of pain, but long and drawn-out. It went on for almost a full minute, and was almost, I don't know, kind of musical. I looked at Tom and the fake Cockney passengers, but their faces were unreadable.

Zack gripped Tom firmly by the arm and led him to the rear doors of the van, demanding that he open it. He didn't resist, just nodded, and got out a set of keys. He put one of them in the door, turned it, and the van opened.

I saw that the two big guys had walked up next to us, so I was gettin' ready for trouble, but there's no way I would have guessed what was in there.

It was a coffin. An old, wooden coffin. Rough, unvarnished. I could see splinters where the nails had been hammered in badly. Wrapped all around it was a thick metal chain ending in a heavy padlock. That weird moaning was coming from inside it. It was the only sound that cut through pounding rain.

I tensed up, reaching for my baton – if these people were kidnappers or worse, we would be in *big* trouble. I was ready for a *fight,* but they just stood there, not moving, staring at us. *Everything* about the situation felt wrong.

I looked over at Zack, and he seemed to be thinking the same thing. He looked over at the two men in overalls and told them to take it out, then looked over to Tom asking if he had a key to the padlock. Reaching into his jacket, the man who called himself Tom pulled out a large iron key and handed it to my partner. Didn't look like the other keys.

I wanted to head back to the car and call in some backup, but Zack was a senior officer, and if he thought we should open it first, *[inhale]* I was gonna back his play.

Zack took the key and walked towards the coffin, which now lay on the wet tarmac, lit only by the headlights of our car. The moaning was louder now, almost drowning out the sound of the hammering

rain. Water had begun to flow off the wood, but everything else about it was still.

As we got closer, I could see the words “Do Not Open” scratched into the surface of the wood. It didn’t look like my partner was paying them any attention, though. He gently placed the key into the lock, wincing slightly as he touched the metal, and turned it.

[BACKGROUND VIBRATIONS INTENSIFY FURTHER, WITH SOMEWHAT-CAVERNOUS WAVERING/SIGHING SOUNDS]

The chains snapped off like they were spring-loaded. They whipped around violently, and Zack jumped back, slipping and falling on his back. I brought my baton up, just in case the strangers made a move, but they were… motionless.

The moaning had stopped. The only sound was the creaking of hinges as the lid of the coffin began to move. It was slow, the gap appearing first as just a crack, before finally opening completely. It was too dark to see what was inside at first, but when I shone my torch inside, I heard Zack gasp. I think I did as well.

Inside of that wooden coffin, there was a staircase. It went down, apparently into the ground below, and seemed to go on as deep as I could see. They were steep, carved out of what looked like solid stone, and the rock that made up the walls didn’t match the wet tarmac around us, all the earth that would have been underneath it. It was completely impossible.

I tried to ask Tom or his companions about it, I *yelled* at them to explain what the hell was going on, but they just stood there, *staring* at it. So I *hit* one of them with my baton.

[ADDITION OF WOBBLY, HIGHER-PITCHED VIBRATIONS]

It was one of the large men in overalls, though I'm not sure which one. It was like hitting solid wood, and the blow jarred my arm badly, making me drop the only weapon I had. Even then he just stood there, staring at the casket. There was a sound of movement from behind me. I turned to see Isaac walking into the coffin, his torch shining into the hollow below. He'd already disappeared up to his waist, and there was this look on his face that I have never seen before – relaxed, like he was asleep.

I shouted for him, started to run but I felt a huge hand grip my shoulder. I grabbed it with my good arm, tried to escape it, but the grip was too strong. The texture of the flesh was like hard rubber. All I could do was watch as my partner kept walking into the earth, on stairs that couldn't be there. After a few seconds, he was completely out of sight.

I expected to hear something – shouting, a, a scream, *something* – but it was still just the rain. The lid closed very slowly, and then he was gone. Just a coffin sitting on the hard shoulder of the M6.

The hand released my shoulder as the two men in overalls began to walk over and calmly wrap the chains back around it.

I felt a sudden burst of anger and picked up my baton. I lunged at them, but the one closest to me moved quicker than I would have thought possible. His fist slammed into my chest like a cannonball, and I felt a couple of ribs break. I collapsed to the floor, just lay there, as Tom and the two men locked the coffin back up, loaded it into the van, and drove off. I never saw Isaac Masters again.

[STATIC/VIBRATIONS DIE DOWN]

When I called it in, I was expecting a manhunt, an investigation, some kind of *justice.* It wasn't like we didn't have plenty of leads. Instead, I was handed a form I didn't recognize, told to sign it, and then reassigned to the Met. Since then, it's been one spook story after another.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Thank you. Um… are you quite all right?

DAISY

[angry] No. I never told that story to anyone except my old sergeant.

ARCHIVIST

I'm… not sure, I, er, uh –

DAISY

I should go.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, of course, I'll see you out. Uh, there is *one* other thing – I've been meaning to ask Basira, but you might know better –

DAISY

I'm done.

ARCHIVIST

Oh – yes, it's just, j– *[quickly]* do you know anything about *vampires?*

DAISY

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Oh!

Uh, it's just – that –

DAISY

A while back, there were some problems. Arrest irregularities around a few missing-person cases. Suspects being released without proper interrogation. Recordings of the interviews showed the subject wouldn't say a word, but the officers doing the interview would let them go anyway.

[STATIC/VIBRATIONS BEGIN]

I don't know the details of the investigation, but there's a new operating procedure now.

ARCHIVIST

Which would be…?

DAISY

Cases matching certain parameters have to be monitored by another officer outside the room by video. In the very specific circumstance where the suspect says nothing, but the interrogating officer acts as though they have, they're immediately removed from the room. Then, they call me.

ARCHIVIST

Just you…?

DAISY

There are a few others around who do it, but I take care of a dozen or so precincts. I cuff the suspect's hands and legs, drive them out into the middle of Epping Forest, and burn them to ashes. There's never enough left to be a problem.

[ARCHIVIST CAN BE HEARD EXHALING IN HORROR]

I don't know if they're vampires, exactly, but that's what we call

them.

ARCHIVIST

Good lord… H-how many have you… taken care of?

DAISY

Mm… five in the last nine years.

ARCHIVIST

I see…

DAISY

[anxious, drawn] Don't tell Basira. She doesn't know about that procedure. I, I'm not sure how much she'd understand, she – she's not – cut out for that kind of work.

ARCHIVIST

Of, of course I won't –

DAISY

Don't tell her any of this, okay? *I* was never here. If she wants to get you more tapes, that's *her* business, but you keep this visit to yourself! Got that?!

ARCHIVIST

Uh, uh, uh, of course!

DAISY

Good.

[HARD, ABRUPT CLICK; DAISY TURNED IT OFF HERSELF]

[CLICK]

Supplemental.

That was… an interesting interview. It seems we're not done with sinister coffins just yet. The contents were surprising, to say the least, but don't give any real clues as to its origin, purpose, or even its relationship with Breekon and Hope. Are they simply… couriers? Guardians? Hostages?

At least I also have confirmation that the vampires Trevor Herbert described are not purely figments of a drug-addled mind. I probably shouldn't be too pleased to discover that there are even more violent hunters stalking us through the night, but there it is.

I'll… admit to feeling a bit hurt by Basira's true motivations. I suppose it's hardly surprising, I have not been the most… stable over these last few months. Either way, I'll not be bringing it up.

Even if I wasn't genuinely somewhat afraid of Detective Tonner *[nervous laugh]* such a revelation would only harm our relationship, and I *need* those tapes. I can't afford to have Gertrude's time at the

Institute disappear back into obscurity.

I'll check the one I have, and then wait to hear from Basira. Or perhaps I should try to make contact…? I should really have got a, number or something. Well, *that's* a matter for later. I need to go home. Try to get some sleep.

I just wish it wasn't raining.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG062 – First Edition

Statement #0080307

[CLICK]

GERTRUDE

Well?

MARY

No need to rush me, Gertrude. I'm sure we've got all the time in the world. Besides, look at this dusty old thing. 'spect it needs time to warm up. You don't use it much anymore, do you?

GERTRUDE

Tea?

MARY

God, no. Hate the stuff.

GERTRUDE

Why are you here?

MARY

To make my statement, of course. I know the Institute and me

haven't always seen eye-to-eye, as it were, but I thought it was the least I could do.

GERTRUDE

Why now?

MARY

Why not? Big changes are coming, Gertrude! And I have to think about leaving something for posterity.

GERTRUDE

Fine. Subject is Mary Keay, recorded 3rd of July, 2008. What is it regarding?

MARY

What a question. I wonder? Plenty to choose from, I suppose.

GERTRUDE

Take your time.

MARY

Did I ever tell you about my first Leitner? Of course, this was before he was collecting them, so back then it was just a strange book. To think there was a time before he'd stamped them with his mark. I feel we must have called them something. Did we even know how many there were? Or did we just think of each as a thing all its

own?

GERTRUDE

No. I don't recall.

MARY

I met him a few times, you know. Must have been about fifteen years ago. Not long before his library burned down. He wasn't all that impressive, to be honest. Shorter than I expected, and slower, somehow. I expected a whirlwind of intense energy, but he was gentle, methodical, perfectly pleasant to talk to.

Jurgen Leitner bored me. Whenever he came to look through my stuff, he'd spend almost a full minute on each book, just staring at it, examining the pages, and half the time leave without buying anything. Good riddance, if you ask me!

GERTRUDE

I wouldn't know. I can't say we ever crossed paths

MARY

I suppose not. You… don't really go out and look for yourself, do you? Just wait here for the researchers' leftovers.

GERTRUDE

[snort] It's not that bad. Sometimes, someone will insist on giving me a statement directly. Though I rarely see the point.

MARY

Well. They don't understand up there. They don't know what this place is. You do, though, don't you? We're on the same side, really. Even if Elias disagrees.

GERTRUDE

If you say so. I believe you were giving me an account of your first encounter with one of the books.

MARY

Oh, of course. I was very young but I still remember it clear as day.

MARY (STATEMENT)

I was nine years old at the time, so it would have been… 1955? It was shortly after my idiot father had gotten himself killed, and my mother was still working for your Institute. We were living in Whitechapel back then, just off Turner Street. It wasn't much, just a couple of rooms and a stove, but it was enough for us.

My mother worked long hours, as even back then the Institute didn't pay their researchers well. And she supplemented our meagre income by working late at a factory on Grove Road. It made dressing gowns. Most of the time, I was left to my own devices. If she'd had any sense, my mother would have shocked your lot and gone to work at the factory full time. She would have learned a damn sight more.

Still, she believed in the work. And the one thing she was never neglectful of was what she called my “true studies.” I’m grateful to her, of course. I just wish that she’d got over a slavish devotion to you and your patron.

GERTRUDE

Well, you make a lot of assumptions, Mary. And I thought we were supposed to be on “the same side.”

MARY

Mm, yes. I suppose you’re right. I just like to diversify my portfolio a bit, as it were.

MARY (STATEMENT)

Often, during my studies, my mother would talk to me of the amazing arcane relics at your Institute. I’m sure you can imagine my disappointment when I finally got a look at the collection of mediocrity that you call your “Artefact Storage.”

But long before that, the idea of dark and fearful items of power had taken root in my young mind. I used to spend afternoons hunting through antique and junk shops. There were plenty to choose from, back then. Searching for anything strange, hunting for that thing that would call to me in a dark, secret voice. I never found it, of course. Not back then.

But when I saw Dr. Margaret Tellison moving in across the street, I knew immediately that there was something different about her.

She was tall and thin, with long dark hair pulled into a severe bun. She wore a deep blue woolen dress, and carried an old leather briefcase, that seemed constantly on the verge of buckling, although she carried it with ease. I don't know what exactly it was about her that stuck out to me, but as soon as I saw her, I knew she was what my mother had always talked about. She was touched by powers like those that watched over our family.

She had a small GP practice on Nelson Street, not far from the Royal London Hospital. Back then, Whitechapel was a heavily Jewish neighborhood, and there weren't many Gentile doctors around, so it didn't take Dr. Tellison long to build up a healthy client list.

I started to watch her. Whenever my mother was at work, I would sit myself on the steps opposite her practice, and watch the steady stream of patients.

Over the weeks, I started to notice something. The first time an ambulance was called to take one of her patients to the hospital, I didn't think much of it. But when another one came the day afterwards, and another three days later, it started to occur to me that there was something more within those walls than I knew. I decided that I had to see for myself.

It had not gone unnoticed to me that many of Dr. Tellison's clients did not bother to knock on her front door, simply entering with a soft call to announce themselves. Leaving the front door of her practice unlocked was no doubt good for her clients, but also

provided me with easy access, when I finally overcame my trepidation.

I had paid great attention to how loud the door was, and timed my entry to the passing of a butcher's truck, the roar of the engine covering the sound of the door. And then, just like that, I was inside. I cursed myself for not having spent more time trying to get a sense of the interior of the building, as I had not expected the waiting room to be so sparse. There were three uncomfortable-looking wooden chairs, several bookshelves filled with worn-looking paperbacks, and a dim bulb in a wire cage. There was only a single door leading further into the building, with a peeling coat of plain white paint. My plan had been to find somewhere to hide, but it didn't look like there was anywhere actually to do so.

I remember I was stood there, still wondering what to do, when I heard heavy footsteps approaching from behind the door. I froze, looking around desperately for anywhere to hide myself, as the steps grew closer. I had just made the decision to flee the way I had come when the door opened. A short man with a bristling moustache walked out clutching a slip of paper that looked to be a prescription. He nodded to me curtly as he walked past, and left through the front door without saying a word.

I breathed a sigh of relief, and looked down the corridor he had come from. It was darker than I expected. The light bulb had either blown or been turned off, and there didn't seem to be any windows to let in the faint glow of daylight. There was a staircase on one side, opposite a door labeled with Dr. Tellison's name, which I

assumed to be her office.

As I approached, I noticed a sizable crack in the wood below the staircase, and looking closer, saw a small door to an under-stairs storage area. Opening it as quietly as I could, I saw it was empty, and judging by the dust, didn't look like it was ever used. I crawled inside and closed the door behind me, delighted to find my suspicions had been correct. Through the crack in the wood, I had a clear view of the doctor's door, and, I hoped, what was behind it.

I didn't have to wait long to find out. A few minutes after I'd settled in my hiding place, I saw the office door open and Dr. Tellison stepped out. She walked briskly into the waiting room, and, after a few seconds of muffled conversation, led an elderly man back into her office. She entered first, leaving her patient to close the door behind him. He did not, and I was treated to a good view of her workplace. It was tiled, clean and shining, with a large brown leather examination table, upon which the old man perched as she hovered around him, poking, measuring, and asking questions I couldn't quite hear.

There was a small, sparse desk in one corner, a cabinet affixed to the wall that I assumed contained her medicines and equipment, and on the floor I could see a squat iron safe. I immediately knew that whatever fearful secrets drew me towards this doctor, they would be bound within that safe.

I saw nothing of importance that day, or the day after that, when I snuck back into the same space. I haunted the cramped shadows

beneath that staircase for almost a week before it happened.

I was always careful to be home when my mother would be there, but that wasn't difficult, and Dr. Tellison never seemed to lock the door to her practice. I remember it was Sunday, and the summer had made my hiding place almost intolerably hot. It must have been almost as warm in the office, as the doctor took to leaving the door open almost all day, allowing whatever draught might come to blow through the building. I saw her inspect and treat almost a dozen strangers over the course of the morning, but still there was no hint of anything untoward.

But shortly before she was due to close for the day, a short, matronly woman arrived. She had curly brown hair, seemed to be in perfect health, and smiled like a fool as she made her way into Dr. Tellison's office. The doctor greeted her pleasantly enough, but as the check-up began I caught the quickest glimpse of something cruel in her eyes. A certain predatory look.

About ten minutes into the appointment, Dr. Tellison walked over to a cabinet and retrieved a small syringe. She talked amiably to her patient as she sterilized the vein and pushed the needle inside. She kept chatting away as the plunger went down. She even kept talking in that loud, friendly manner as the woman with the curly brown hair began to convulse violently.

Once. Twice. And then she was dead.

As I watched this, my heart was racing. I could lie and say that

what I saw made me afraid, but I think we both know the thrill of watching that murder inspired a very different feeling within me. A dark, vicious thing that to this day I can't fully name. But it was beautiful, and strange.

Though what happened next was even stranger. Dr. Tellison lifted the still warm-body of her patient fully onto the table, before cutting through the fabric of the dress with a pair of shears, exposing an expanse of skin on the woman's back.

Then she opened the safe. 24-18-3-50, and then the key. I only had to watch her do it once. Inside, I saw two books, one small and bound in leather, the other large and misshapen.

As she retrieved the larger of the two, she brushed away what looked like to be a small pile of animal bones, and picked up a wickedly sharp-looking fountain pen. She leaned over the still form on the table and began to write, not in the book, but on the flesh of the woman she had killed. I could see even from my hiding place her handwriting was cramped and messy, leaving some of the blue ink flowing off her subject like blood.

After almost twenty minutes of hurried writing, she stepped back, apparently waiting for the ink to dry. She then retrieved a clean scalpel from her cabinet, and, with a care she had not given the writing, she began to cut through the dead woman's back, peeling away the skin upon which she had written and leaving behind a small patch of flayed flesh. She hung it, still dripping, upon a hook that I hadn't noticed on the wall, then stepped over to the phone,

and made a call.

The ambulance arrived so quickly I wondered if they'd been waiting for her. Three men in the uniform of the London Ambulance Service entered. They wore sullen, bitter expressions, and exchanged no words with Dr. Tellison as they wrapped the woman in a body bag and took her outside.

The doctor handed the oldest of them an envelope that I can only assume contained a large amount of money, and they left. I'm quite certain they never even went near the hospital.

It was now dark outside, and I knew my mother would be worried, but I could not leave unnoticed. Nor did I want to, while there was still a chance to watch more of this strange ritual.

As the skin dried upon its hook, the doctor opened the large book, and I saw its thick pages were roughly stitched to the spine with coarse thread. As she turned those pages, they plopped with an unmistakable softness.

She stopped at one page, seemingly at random, near the end of the book, and began to read aloud, her thin finger tracing the lines of text I could not see.

As she spoke, I felt the air grow thick and heavy, a scent like wet dirt rolling through the building and settling in my chest. I don't know exactly when he appeared. In fact, even now, I'm still not able to pinpoint the moment they arrive – like falling asleep, it has simply happened already.

The old man who now stood before Dr. Tellison was familiar to me, even though I didn't know his name. One of her patients, I remembered, who'd been taken away in an ambulance some three weeks before. There he stood, hunched and cowering. He spoke in a cracked voice, begging her to release him, demanding to know what was happening. In return, she was questioning him about his will, about his bank details, or where he had hidden money.

I couldn't believe it – a power like this, and she was using it to try and make money. It sickened me. It still does.

I knew then that she didn't deserve the book.

After she dismissed the old man, she collapsed into her desk chair, exhausted, and fell asleep.

I took my father's straight razor from my pocket. It was my most prized possession, and all I had left of him after he used it to cut his own throat. The only sensible decision he ever made.

I crawled from my hiding place so slowly, so quietly, she barely even stirred as the blade glided through her windpipe. I'd never killed anyone before. I didn't particularly enjoy it. My inclinations, predictably, were more toward watching than doing the deed myself.

Still, there was some satisfaction in the end. I did try to bind her, but it didn't go quite right, and her page was a dreadful mess. I can't imagine she enjoys it there at all. It took a lot more practice to get it right – not to mention learning Sanskrit – but I got there, in

the end.

After a lifetime, I know all its secrets, save one. And I have a pretty good idea about how to find that.

GERTRUDE

That does explain why you broke with the Institute. Who does the book come from?

MARY

The End, of course. I could never truly serve it – I just don't find death that interesting. But I've always found a singular devotion far too restrictive. Just ask Eric. Or what's left of him.

GERTRUDE

What about the other book? The smaller one.

MARY

Just a bit of viscera. Poems about dying animals, also in Sanskrit. Drops a lot of bones. I don't even think it has a real title. Pointless, really. I eventually sold it to Leitner – though it came back to me after the attack.

GERTRUDE

I should really tell Elias about this.

MARY

By all means! He's not exactly big on action though, is he. He'll just be happy I gave a statement.

GERTRUDE

And do you have any proof of this? Your "magic book."

MARY

Here, you can keep this page. I made sure it was in English.

GERTRUDE

…

Who… Who is it?

MARY

A surprise, dear! Just make sure you're alone when you read it.

Goodbye, Gertrude. Wish me luck.

[DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES]

GERTRUDE

Well. I, I don't really know what to add to that. If what she says is true, I should think carefully before reading this page aloud. I should probably destroy it… though, I do rather hate the smell of burning skin.

Anyway, that's a decision for another day.

[SOUND OF WOOD CREAKING]

I could rather do with a cup of tea, I think.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

There's a lot here. In many ways, the context this gives Mary Keay's odd relationship with death is the least interesting part of it. I knew that her family was connected to Jonah Magnus and the Institute somehow, but I had no idea that Gertrude was involved. Even if they didn't like each other. Maybe I should have known.

Elias might not have killed her, but there is a lot he's not telling me. I'm afraid to ask, though. The Magnus Institute is not what it appears to be, and until I know what it is, and what it's for, there's no way I'm letting Elias know how much I'm aware of.

But in spite of all that, I'm strangely excited. Because what sticks out to me, more than anything else in that tape, is the very distinctive floorboard at the end. One that hasn't changed in the eight years since this statement was given. There's never been any

reason to look closely at a random section of floor. This bit wasn't even breached by any of the worms… because it had Gertrude's hidden compartment beneath it.

[SOUND OF WOOD CREAKING]

Hm. No strange skin page. But there is a laptop, and a key. I wonder what it opens.

End supplement.

[CLICK]

MAG063 – The End of the Tunnel

Statement #0143103

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Erin Gallagher-Nelson, regarding an urban exploration trip beneath Saint Paul's Church, West Hackney. Original statement given March 31st, 2014. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I'm sure you know what urban exploring is. I'm sure you've had plenty of amateur yahoos in here who stumble across a ghost in some old factory, so I'll spare you the breakdown of how it works. And if you don't know what it is, well, the Internet's a thing. Look it up.

I'm about as close to a professional as you can get out of what's basically trespass as a sport. I work as a photographer, and if I play my cards right, I can get more money from an abandoned pump station than from shooting some spoiled human Barbie for "Self-

Hate Monthly," or whatever. It's always been me and Luke Nelson. He was my wife's brother, and did all the lighting for our shoots. At least, until he was eaten by the darkness last week.

That's why I'm here: because I didn't dream that. *It happened.* I don't care what Steph says, I don't need to talk to a shrink, I need to talk to *you.*

We were underneath Saint Paul's Church in West Hackney. Horrid, boxy building, really makes you wonder about God's housing standards? I mean, I'm just saying, if it was my house, I'd be pretty pissed. Still, I guess if He didn't want it, he should have protected its predecessor from Nazi bombs, because Saint Paul's used to be St. James before it got blitzed all the way to rubble.

Everyone always forgets how much London is *under* London. I mean, it's not as bad as somewhere like Edinburgh, where they literally buried half the city and built a new one on top – but some places it's not too far from it. And I'd been doing a lot of research into Saint Paul's-That-Used-To-Be-Saint James, because it looked like it might be exactly one such a place.

Plans of the drainage and underground of the neighbourhood seemed to indicate that there was a large subterranean area directly beneath Saint Paul's that *appeared* to be avoided by all public works – yet the plans for the modern church didn't indicate anything below ground level.

What this told me was that the old church of Saint James probably

had quite a sizable underground presence, which hadn't been completely destroyed by the bombs. And which its inheritor didn't use.

Early- to mid-19th-century Victorian vaults, undisturbed for 70 years? It was *exactly* the sort of thing that's in vogue at the moment with a certain section of art-y magazines, and I was sure I could sell a few to Getty and a handful of other stock photo sites. And hey, it wasn't like I hadn't broken into a church before.

Luckily, Saint Paul's West Hackney was Church of England, meaning they didn't lock up as tight as some places. Catholic churches can be a real pain, as they actually have some valuables inside that need to be protected? But this, like most C-of-E, was plain and unadorned inside. So while they took plenty of care with the offices, they weren't so conscientious about locking up the main church building, 'cause quite frankly, there was nothing to steal – unless you like hymn books.

It took me and Luke less than a minute to get inside. It was last Tuesday, the 25th. I suppose, technically, it was Wednesday the 26th, as it was well past midnight when we made our move. Once we were in, we kept our torches low, stowed our equipment, and went looking for anything that might get us deeper inside.

At first it looked like we might have been mistaken, and there was no way beneath. But then Luke spotted what looked like a removable panel in the floor just off to the right of what passed for a podium. It was heavier than it looked, but after a bit of work with

the crowbar, it came off.

It didn't look like it had been removed in decades – maybe not since the new church was built. But what surprised me was the air that came out when it shifted. It hissed, like a long-held breath, and the air that rose up from that hole was icy cold, and damp. Not unexpected, but what did surprise me was how clean it smelled. Like an autumn night after the rain.

[LOW BACKGROUND VIBRATIONS BECOME NOTICEABLE]

There was no ladder or stairs down, but we'd brought plenty of rope, so in we went. The gloom seemed to swallow us. I would have sworn that at times I could feel it physically pressing against me.

As it turned out, it was only a couple of metres down to the floor of the underground tunnel, and our flashlights showed exactly what I had hoped for: old Victorian brickwork.

The passage stretching away from us in both directions was absolutely perfect, and I wasted no time in setting up a few shots, while Luke placed the lighting rigs. Down there, the flashes seemed almost blinding, but I was sure I was getting some excellent shots. It was only when I had a quick glance through them on the screen of my SLR that I began to get irritated. Clearly, Luke had been standing in front of the light when I had started to shoot.

In every single image, where the far wall was lit by the bright lights, you could see the clear shape of a person's shadow.

I got into quite an argument with Luke about it. He insisted that he'd never make such a rookie move. I told him that he could argue with me, but not with the camera. Eventually, he stormed off to go exploring further on.

I took another picture before I followed him. The shadow was still there, and it seemed to be ever so slightly closer.

I don't know why I ignored it. The human mind is amazingly adept at ignoring things that don't make sense, that it doesn't want to see. I convinced myself it was a quirk of the angles of that location. I didn't even let myself entertain the thought that it could be a problem with my extremely-expensive camera, so I definitely didn't consider the possibility of a supernatural explanation.

I followed Luke further on until, after about 20 minutes, we came to the ruins of a chamber of some sort. The roof had collapsed, probably from the bombing that had destroyed Saint James Church, and the rubble blocked off most of it. It looked like it had once been a circular room, and either side of the entrance, I could see doorways blocked with fallen stone.

There was no way we'd be able to shift enough debris to access them, but it was strange: as the torch beams played across them, even with most of them completely covered in collapsed masonry, they still didn't seem as dark as the corridor we'd come from.

I took some photos. The composition of the place was excellent, and the blocked doorways had an odd sort of stark grandeur to them.

They were certainly well-made, if they managed to survive what looked to be a direct hit by a German bomb. I checked the photos, and there were no shadows, which was something of a relief.

We headed back the other way. When we reached our ropes hanging down from the hole above us, Luke started to have some concerns. Well, I say concerns: he wanted out of there. He wanted us to pack up and climb out and leave, telling me he was getting weird vibes from the place, and was trying to convince me we'd seen enough. Looking up at that bright square, lit invitingly with the moon shining from church windows, I was half-tempted to agree with him.

The trouble was that, due to the problems with the first shoot, I had one, maybe two pictures of the quality I could do anything with, and that wasn't nearly enough. I told him bluntly that I didn't have enough, and if I didn't get paid, he didn't get paid. I saw the conflict on his face: he wanted to get out of there, sure, but apparently not as much as he wanted to make rent.

So: on we went, further into the tunnel. I don't know how far we went. I stopped every 10 meters or so to set up and try to get a good picture, but the shadows were back, and worse than before. Now there'd be two or three of them in some pictures. It wasn't quite as clearly a human silhouette, so I managed to tell myself that it must be a quirk of how the tunnel reflected the light – even though, looking back, that makes no sense whatsoever.

Still, I kept going, hoping to find somewhere where I could get

some shots of the stark, gloomy tunnel, with bricks so black they almost looked like coal. We'd move, set up, shoot, check, and then I'd swear at my camera. I don't know how many times we did this. Luke got jumpier and jumpier the whole way.

Didn't feel like much more than 10 minutes we'd been doing it, but when I checked my watch, we'd been down there for almost two hours. We had finally come to the end of the path, and it was just that: an end. A blank wall of bricks indicating the stopping of the tunnel that seemed to go under a good deal of Hackney.

At this point, I at last decided to write the whole thing off and head back. It was as I turned to Luke to tell him this, that my torch died. There was no fanfare: it just fizzled for a second, then turned off with a faint *pop*. I looked over to Luke about to ask him to pass me the spare batteries – when I saw his face. I don't think I've ever seen anyone as scared as he was at that moment. Then his torch went out as well, and there was nothing but darkness.

I could hear him fumbling for something that I assumed was the camera lights, and a second later I heard the *click*… *click*… *click* of him trying to turn them on. Nothing happened. He kept clicking the switches, on and on, and I could feel his desperation, but we were still trapped in the pitch-black.

Eventually, he stopped, and we just stood there. I wanted to say something reassuring, to reach out and let him know I was still there, but I was terrified of breaking the silence. There was just his breathing, labored and scared. I became aware of my own breath:

quick, and betraying the panic I was trying to pretend I wasn't feeling.

And then I heard it: the third set of breathing. It was quiet, at first, long and slow, and *very* deliberate. The more I listened, the louder it seemed to become, as though whoever was down here with us was making sure we could hear it. And then another set of breaths joined it, deep and throaty. And a fifth – a sixth – then more. We were surrounded on all sides by the sound of breathing, getting louder, getting closer.

Luke let out a small whimper, and all together, they stopped. In their place, there came a scraping sound, something metal, that sounded like being dragged across the bricks, far away behind us, but getting closer, and fast. It was joined by a heavy, thumping tread: footsteps coming towards us, rhythmic and unhurried.

I almost thought it could be my heartbeat, pounding in my ears – but the echo assured me it was coming from down the tunnel. Then the scraping came again, now from the other direction, and I sank to the floor, clutching my camera to my chest like some sort of protective talisman.

It was silent, once again.

The noise that broke the stillness this time is the one that is still ringing in my ears. It was far more dreadful than the others because of how familiar it was – though I had never heard it in such a manner before. It was Luke's voice, and it was screaming in agony,

a shrill, gut-wrenching screech of pain and fear that wiped away all thought in a second and replaced it with blind panic. I wanted to run, but my legs had locked up.

Somewhere in my mind, I remembered the flash on my camera, and my fingers instinctively flicked the switch.

As I pressed the button, the screaming stopped, with a wet snap, and for the worst moment of my life, an explosion of light shot through the darkness.

I saw Luke hanging in the air. There was nobody around him, but on the wall, in stark, black outlines, I saw two long, thin shadows standing beside him. On each, I saw one spindly arm gripping his shadow by the shoulders, while the other held up the shadow of his torn-off head.

In front of me, the real one just hung there, dangling as if by some invisible thread, blood dripping onto the body below it. His eyes were staring at me as though pleading for my feeble, flashing camera to save him. I screamed.

The next thing I remember was the painfully-bright light of a dozen torches on my face. It was the rector of Saint Paul's, and a small group of what I assumed to be parishioners. He didn't say a word as he gently led me back towards the entrance. I looked around to see if Luke's body was there, but I knew deep down that the darkness had eaten him. He was gone.

The rector was very understanding, though I wasn't making much

sense. He spoke soft words of reassurance, brought me out into the sick pale blue of dawn, and called an ambulance to look me over. I didn't get his name, and it was only after I'd reached the hospital, I realized he had taken my camera.

Since then, I've been under observation in the hospital. Nobody listens to my story, and Luke has been officially listed as missing. Steph has been very supportive, but I can see the pain in her eyes. She knows I was the last one to see her brother, and it eats at her. I don't really know what to do now – except to keep the lights on.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

It should come as no surprise to me by now that the foundation stone of the original Church of Saint James in West Hackney was laid on the 17th November, 1821 by Sir Robert Smirke. Even so, I was very much hoping to find at least one architectural oddity lurking beneath the streets of London that did not bear the mark of him or his students.

This particular encounter doesn't seem to have much in common with manifestations from similar buildings. We've had something of a spectrum from him and his ilk: cobwebs entombing, difficulty in navigation, and now a violent, murderous dark.

My first thought was the People's Church of the Divine Host, as they

seem to have some affinity to the darkness, but I can find a no connection of any sort between them and West Hackney Church.

Not that any of the staff there were very helpful. Every one of them claims to have no memory of encountering Miss Gallagher-Nelson, despite hospital admission records clearly stating she was picked up from there on the morning of the 26th March, 2014. Tim is convinced that at least some of them are lying, but there's little we can do to gain any information they don't wish to volunteer.

We've been unable to follow up with Miss Gallagher-Nelson. All attempts to contact her have been prevented by her wife, Stephanie Gallagher-Nelson, who has made it abundantly clear that we are not welcome, and are to attempt no further contact.

Luke Nelson remains missing.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

Supplemental.

[frustrated, speaking quickly] I have been attempting to access Gertrude's laptop, but have thus far had no luck. None of the obvious passwords I've tried have been successful, and I am unsure

who can provide both assistance and discretion. There may be further clues on the other tapes, but so far I've had *no* word from Basira! I'm so close to finding something, maybe I should just go down there –

[DOOR OPENS]

MELANIE

Excuse me, do you have a moment?

ARCHIVIST

Miss King – uh – how did you, how did you get in here…?

MELANIE

The new girl let me in. Are you all right?

ARCHIVIST

Hm? Sorry?

MELANIE

You look like *hell.*

ARCHIVIST

It's been a hard few months. Look, can I help you, because if you're just after another shouting match –

MELANIE

No! I, um – I actually do need your help.

ARCHIVIST

…

Hm. Interesting.

MELANIE

All right, can you not be an arsehole about it? I just need access to your library.

ARCHIVIST

So talk to Diana, *she* runs the place.

MELANIE

Yes, I don't exactly have the academic credentials you guys demand, so I *apparently* need someone to vouch for me –

[JOHN SIGHS]

– and you're basically the closest thing I have to a friend here.

ARCHIVIST

[heh] We've spoken once, and we ended up screaming at each other –

MELANIE

Yes! And that's more than I have with anyone else here. Also, uh, *Georgie* actually has some nice things to say about you. *That* came as a surprise. You didn't even tell me you knew her.

ARCHIVIST

I – it was a long time ago. *Before* she started doing "What the Ghost."

[MELANIE GOES 'HM']

It's a surprise to me as well, to be honest. We didn't exactly *part* on the best of terms…

[MELANIE GOES 'HM' MORE EMPHATICALLY]

What exactly do you need from us, anyway? Can't your showbiz friends help you?

MELANIE

No, I'm, uh – most of, most of them won't talk to me anymore.

ARCHIVIST

What happened? Did word get out that you've given a statement to us, what was it, *"credulous idiots?"*

MELANIE

Not *exactly*. Look, in my business, your reputation is *all* that you have. The industry is mainly full of skeptics pretending to be believers pretending to be skeptics –

ARCHIVIST

I think the word you're looking for is "charlatans" –

MELANIE

Can you not? *Please?* I'm *trying* to –

[distressed] …look, Ghost Hunt UK split up. I mean, not formally, but well, you know, Pete was always a flake to begin with, and the others just drifted away…

ARCHIVIST

[more gently] I'm sorry to hear that. I noticed you weren't updating anymore.

MELANIE

I *tried* to get a new crew together – but it was tough. I took to going on expeditions solo, but I don't really have the skills to get usable footage. I saw a few weird things… then I, then I got arrested.

ARCHIVIST

…Go on.

MELANIE

Yes, I… broke into the train graveyard up near Rotherham. Got picked up by his security, and I – I wasn't doing well. When I was being thrown out, some late-night dog walker got a video of me screaming at them about ghosts. *[humorless laugh]* When it went online…

ARCHIVIST

Your all-important professional reputation went with it.

MELANIE

Yes. Look, I have leads that I really need to follow up, but as far as my colleagues are concerned, these days, I'm the ghost.

ARCHIVIST

Well, for what it's worth, I'm sorry. I do know what it's like to lack the respect of your peers. I'll have a word with Diana, see if I can get you into the library.

MELANIE

Thank you. Seriously. Now, uh, how do I get out of this place?

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Sasha can show you out.

MELANIE

Sasha…?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. She should be around here somewhere.

MELANIE

Oh. Right…

Well, let me know about the library, okay?

[DOOR OPENS]

ARCHIVIST

Will do.

[DOOR CLOSES]

…What a strange woman.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG064 – Burial Rites

Statement #0152005

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Donna Gwynne, regarding an unlicensed archaeological dig near the Red Sea in Egypt. Original statement given May 20th, 2015. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

You'll forgive me if I'm vague on the details – I have to be. The job I was on at the time was a long way from legal, and even if the courts could never prove it, let's just say the people I worked for take privacy very seriously indeed. All names I give here, aside from my own, are aliases.

It's hard to get a job in archaeology these days. I mean, I guess it always was? But education funding is being squeezed across the board, and the fact is, most higher-up positions in the field tend to only open up once the previous occupant dies.

It's sad, but if you look at a full lecture hall on the archaeology

course of any major university, you can be pretty sure that none of the people you're looking at are going to end up doing it for a living. A few might get assistant positions on a project or two, but the long, thankless hours and endless grind to climb a ladder already full up with old, posh men will probably change their minds.

I suppose what I'm saying is, I was never going to be a *real* archaeologist. So when I got a chance to do some… unlicensed work, I figured it was either that, or train to be a teacher. And I *hate* children.

See, the thing is that there's a lot of very valuable stuff in the ground. Ancient artefacts, forgotten knowledge, all that good stuff… but acquiring it takes a lot of time, a lot of money, and a lot of fiddly licenses and permissions. Not to mention that governments can get very grabby when it comes to the prizes of antiquity. You can't take three steps in this field without some wannabe-Indiana Jones declaring something or other "belongs in a museum." But museums have very limited budgets, and the private market has a never-ending appetite for valuable ancient treasures.

So you have my industry, which is like normal archaeology but a bit more… free-form. I like to think of myself as a rogue archaeologist, but I think most people would just call me a grave robber. Which is daft, because half the time it isn't even graves we're dealing with. But that makes surprisingly little difference in terms of legality.

I worked for a man named Stavo. I still might, I'm not sure. He doesn't really make contact when we don't have a job, and this one ended badly enough that I'm not sure whether or not I'm getting another call. I hope so. I really don't want to be a teacher…

He first contacted me three years ago, after funding fell through for my second PhD, and some professional disputes meant that the chances of my career continuing were… somewhere between "zero" and "no."

He was very to-the-point with me, explaining right away that he organized rapid-turnaround illegal digs, taking whatever high-value finds were transportable, and selling them to private collectors. He had plenty of labour, security, and organizational support, but he needed someone on staff to identify and quickly appraise artefacts or other discoveries. He had previously had a disgraced anthropology professor from Harvard, but he'd apparently been busted smuggling a few extras through customs in China, and was no longer available.

Stavo said I was just the right choice to fill the position. I agreed on the spot. I never did do great with the ethical aspects of my field. I love the hunt, the research, and the discovery – but, to be honest, expanding the body of mankind's knowledge, or helping a culture connect with its roots, has never been high on my priority list. Certainly not as high as money.

So for the next few years, I traveled the globe with Stavo and his team. There was a geologist I'll call Grigori; Norman, who was the

middleman to various antiques dealers, auction houses, and less-respectable museums; and a pair of quiet Albanians, Barry and Paul, who acted as the muscle. Well, they did the majority of it, but Stavo didn't like it when people put their feet up on a job, so me, Grigori, and Norman spent most of the time working a spade alongside them, as our expertise generally came in useful in the *latter* half of the dig.

I like to think I earned my keep. Certainly there were plenty of times Barry was all set to toss out some priceless treasure because he took it for dusty trash. And Stavo never complained.

This last dig was high-risk. Stavo and Norman had ears in the appropriate offices of most universities and museums, so he got word that the Egyptian government had denied permission for the University of Pennsylvania to look into a possible tomb complex located between Cairo and the Red Sea. Again, I won't go into specifics, but it was right in the middle of the Eastern Desert, a good thirty or forty miles from the closest known explored pyramid or tomb. If the university researchers were right, this place could be both a significant find and – more importantly for us – completely untouched.

It was dangerous, though. When a government denied permission like this, you could never be sure that they weren't going to send people of their own instead, and Stavo had plenty of stories of ex-colleagues that had got themselves inadvertently-arrested when military abruptly turned up to secure a dig site.

Still, the opportunity was too good to pass up, and Stavo had some contacts within the Cairo police force, and so was able to get us a pair of well-bribed policemen to stick around and give us at least a *passing* air of respectability for any civilian who might stumble across us.

So, off I went to Egypt, dreaming of finding a new pyramid. I know that sounds daft, but most pyramids are not as huge, obvious, or intact as those at Giza. After four or five thousand years, most just look like hills, or sometimes dunes, and there could be any number of them waiting undiscovered beneath the Egyptian earth.

I was surprised by how easily we found it. Stavo had gotten a location from the university's application, and Grigori quickly located a likely-looking geological formation on the satellite images. Less than fourteen hours after I got the call, I was standing, shovel-in-hand, in the middle of the Eastern Desert, breaking ground over a tomb that had been unopened for millennia. It was *exhilarating*.

Grigori had done some work to make sure we were digging over what he believed to be the entrance, and it only took a day to unearth the slab of limestone that covered it. I could see hieroglyphics etched onto the surface, but they were far too worn to read. Large upon the stone was carved the closed loop of a shen ring, the symbol of infinity.

This struck me as odd, since just based on the entrance, I was pretty sure this tomb was at least Fourth Dynasty, and the shen ring was usually used to designate a royal burial place. But there were no

cartouches among the hieroglyphics on the entrance, which I would have expected if the tomb contained royalty.

It was a subterranean pyramid, I was now quite certain, but if it had the remains of a pharaoh, their name had not been protected upon death.

Barry and Paul wasted no time in hoisting the limestone slab off the entrance, revealing a dark, yawning passage. In the heat of the sun, I was acutely aware of the cold draft seeping out of the opening.

Stavo gave it a lookover, and asked if there was anything we could salvage from the hieroglyphics. I gave him directions to chip off the Shen ring, and take photos of the rest for later study. Before you ask, I don't have access to those photos – Stavo still has the camera.

You know, in my haste to make sure everything was going smoothly, it hadn't really hit me what we had found until that moment, as I stood on the threshold and breathed air four thousand years old. It was dry, and smelt faintly of cedarwood. I had just helped discover an untouched tomb of the Fourth Dynasty.

We collected our bags, picks, and torches, and headed into the dark. Two things struck me as soon as we were inside. The first was how big the place was. The passages were far wider than I would have assumed, based on my research on comparable tombs. The other was that there was also significantly less ornamentation. And by less, I mean none. The walls were bare, unpainted, and for a horrible moment I thought it might already have been ransacked.

Stavo had the same thought, but Grigori assured us that the condition of the entrance indicated it hadn't been opened since it was originally sealed. The tomb hadn't been robbed – it was just empty.

As we headed deeper, I began to notice passages branching off our path. In each case, they seemed to be heading, more or less, back the way we came.

I called a halt, and Stavo and I took a few minutes to explore one of them. At first, they seemed to be heading back towards the surface, but further corridors branched off, until we finally reached a dead end. Then another, and another.

It took longer than I was comfortable with to find the others again.

It was a labyrinth, not entirely unlike the one found at Hawara. But crucially, it seemed to only assume its deceptive, maze-like form when heading back towards the entrance. When walking deeper in, it was rather straightforward.

I made these observations to Stavo, and he immediately headed back out, and returned carrying the end of the Jeep's winch. It was a hundred and fifty feet in total, and he figured if the tomb ended up going deeper than that, we should probably reconsider our approach entirely.

I could see he was getting irritated by these delays and the lack of obviously-bankable artefacts. I couldn't blame him. I was starting to feel quite on-edge myself.

As it turned out, the winch finished just within sight of the central chamber. So we tied a torch to the end and headed inside.

Like the rest, this room was simple and plain, built out of rough limestone. It was completely empty, save for a raised dais at the centre, about three feet off the floor. Lying there were the remains of an unpainted wooden sarcophagus. It had long since rotted away, though the uncharacteristic copper bands that wrapped it still seemed in good condition.

Among the debris, I could see the pale wrapping of the corpse, tight around in a way that reminded me disconcertingly of a straitjacket. It had worn away in many places, with even the flesh of the mummy itself on show, dark black, and almost shiny in the torchlight.

There was nothing else there at all. No treasures, and no other exits.

It was at that point that Stavo lost it a bit. He'd spent a *lot* of money on this expedition, and to find that there was nothing there except an old corpse and some shards of wood was a significant problem for him. I mean, the architectural implications of the place in terms of mid-to-late-Fourth Dynasty construction practices were kind of amazing. But I didn't think that was something he wanted to hear just then, so I kept quiet. We all did. When Stavo got angry, it was best to just let it run its course rather than trying to talk him down from it and draw his anger your way.

I busied myself making another loop of the room, in case there were

any secret entrances that I'd missed, while behind me he stood there, swearing.

I did notice something in the corner, though: about a half-dozen small bones, with carvings on each face. Dice. I knew that dice games predated the Old Kingdom by some time, and these were excellent quality.

I decided to wait until Stavo had finished ranting before I drew his attention to them. I turned to see him leaning over the corpse, rage on his face, like it was somehow this dead Egyptian's fault that the trip had been a bust. I had to stop myself laughing, until I saw that he might actually punch the thing. The mummy was the only thing in that place aside from the dice that we had any hope of selling, and I couldn't let him damage it.

I shouted at him to stop, and his eyes fixed on me with hatred burning behind them. I explained to him, calmly, and reasonably, that the mummified body before him might be worth a lot of money. This did seem to calm him down a bit, and he was just starting to apologize for his outburst when he went completely still.

His eyes were wide, and he had gone deathly pale. I stepped a bit closer, and, as my torch traveled down from his face and along his arm, I saw it. A blackened, desiccated hand gripping his wrist, the thin fingers clenched tight.

It was moving.

It was alive.

It opened its eyes, but beneath those brittle eyelids were empty crevices where they had long since rotted away. It opened its mouth as though to scream, but no sound came out at all.

I remember thinking, “of course it can’t scream – it doesn’t have any lungs.” Lack of jars meant this would have been a cheaper mummification, and they would have liquefied all the organs over the course of seventy days.

Was this thing alive when that had happened?

Was it buried in salt for seventy days, feeling the cedar oil slowly melting its insides?

These thoughts ran rapidly through my mind as I stood there, frozen in terror.

The sound of Stavo’s pistol shocked me out of my stupor. He always carried a gun when he went on a dangerous job, and he was emptying it into the glossy flesh of the mummy before him. Each shot sent shards of dry skin and dusty bone flying off it.

But it didn’t stop moving, not even when he shoved the gun in the corpse’s mouth and blew off the back of its skull.

It had released him now, and Stavo turned to see the others had already fled back from the chamber, heading towards the surface following the cable back. The strange half-dead creature had spasmed its way off the raised platform now, onto the floor, and lay between me and Stavo and the door.

He gave me an apologetic look, and then ran, leaving me alone with the thing.

The broken, juddering mummy began to drag itself towards me. It was still partially bound in the tight burial cloth, but that didn't stop it making its painstaking way over the dusty ground. There was plenty of room to run around it – it wasn't even that fast – but my legs just wouldn't work as it got closer and closer. Its mouth opened and closed stiffly, dark brown dust falling from it in a steady stream.

I have no idea how it knew I was there. It had no eyes, no nose. There's no way it should have been able to detect me, but it *knew,* and crawled directly towards me.

I managed to reach to my hip and pull out my own weapon, a large hunting knife I'd picked up on our last trip to North America – more because its weight had given me a sense of security than because I knew how to use it. I waved it at the approaching corpse, but there was no reaction.

When I felt its cold, leathery fingers grip my shin, it was like the panic pushed my mind so far that it suddenly snapped back into place. I gripped the knife in both hands, leaned forward, and plunged it into the thing's throat.

The blade sank in with a dry, creaking sound, and the mummy's arms shot up to grip it. I almost threw up from the feeling of its blackened, dead hands on mine, but it was astoundingly strong.

Twitching, it pulled my hands away, dragging the knife out of its throat and moving my arm down lower, positioning the point of the blade on its chest, where the heart should be. Then it made me push the knife in.

The poor creature hung there for a second, then pulled the knife out and made me stab it again. Over and over it made me do it, while its torso racked and convulsed.

It almost seemed like it was crying But without tear ducts or lungs, there was no way to know.

After the fifth time it had made me stab it, it loosened its grip on my hand enough that I could release the knife. With a burst of adrenaline, I took to my feet and fled.

Luckily, Stavo hadn't withdrawn the Jeep's winch cable yet, or else God knows how long I'd have been trapped down there. Especially since when I emerged into the intense sunlight of the desert, I found Paul and Barry arguing over the best way to replace the slab over the entrance.

It took many hours to rebury it completely, but when we were done, it was like no one had ever been there.

Stavo didn't say a word as we drove away.

In ancient Egypt, dying was the most important thing a person would ever do. Your whole life was preparation for it: readying yourself, and acquiring what you would need for the journey. Back

when the Nile was the source of all that kept you alive – the land of the living. But as you got further from it, the very earth itself became hostile to you, unable to support any sort of life at all. It was there, at the outskirts – the edge of life itself – that they built their tombs and pyramids.

I cannot imagine what they would have thought of a person who could not die.

I *can* imagine what they would have done to them.

ARCHIVIST

End statement.

If there's one thing I hate more than statements that can only be followed up by making contact with uncooperative foreign agencies, it is statements where everyone involved is a criminal, who either cannot be tracked down, or is unwilling to discuss their business in any way. This statement manages to neatly combine the two in such a way that *any* verification or follow-up has proven utterly impossible.

The only thing I have found is that Miss Gwynne is now training to become a teacher. I can't deny I find a certain… cruel satisfaction in that fact. I feel anyone who brings me a statement about mummies deserves everything they get.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

BASIRA

You can't just come down to the station asking to –

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, I didn't *think* –

BASIRA

No. You didn't. Now I've got a whole bunch of questions being asked. They're keeping tabs on me at work.

ARCHIVIST

I just wanted to see –

BASIRA

Your next tape. Yeah, I get it, but right now I can't do anything *about* that, because I feel like they're watching me all the time.

ARCHIVIST

I – I mean, if that's the case, should you even have come *down* here?

BASIRA

It's fine, it's – it's just work.

But if there's one thing I've learned, it's that you and me? We suck at this whole spy thing.

ARCHIVIST

[sigh]

BASIRA

I need to wait until things calm down a bit.

ARCHIVIST

Well… Keep me updated, I suppose.

BASIRA

Yeah, if I can.

[DOOR OPENS]

Stay safe.

[DOOR CLOSES]

ARCHIVIST

[whispering] Damn.

End supplement.

[CLICK]

MAG065 – Binary

Statement #0170701

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Are you quite all right?

TESSA

Yeah, just… your tape recorder. It's old.

ARCHIVIST

I get that a lot.

TESSA

I just mean, I've been thinking about "analog" and "digital," what we mean by them?

ARCHIVIST

In terms of information…?

TESSA

Yeah. We use the word "digital" to refer to one specific way of storing information – discrete signal values interpreted at pre-

established levels. “Analog” is just a fancy way of saying “everything else.”

ARCHIVIST

I, uh –

TESSA

[speaking over him] Almost everything in the world is analog, but we’re obsessed with digital. We try to surrender everything into it, break the world down and turn it into as much binary as it takes. But it’s not the same.

I used to work on OCR programs, teaching computers to read, to take the messy physicality of the written word and convert it into something that a computer can understand in a digital format.

ARCHIVIST

I’m not sure what this has to do with my tape recorder.

TESSA

Magnetic tape. Everyone thinks it’s analog, but it’s digital. A lower-tech version than what we use now, but people forget that it was used to store computerized data for decades. Maybe it reminds people of a film reel, or, or maybe nostalgia turns everything analog.

Although people always think of digital as not really there, but the thing is, information is always physically present. It doesn’t exist as

some formless nothing. Even within the tiniest, most advanced storage systems, physical memory cells change and alter themselves to render that information in a language all of their own.

I suppose it isn't language, not really, because, because language as we use it is about as far from digital as you can get. We may call them words, but, the units of data that a computer works with are by their nature discrete and definite, while the words we use are clumsy, vague things, always at the whim of interpretation and decay.

It's the obvious thing to say, that a computer cannot feel, but it's true. No sequence of distinct ones and zeros can replicate the swirling cocktail of chemicals and, and, you know, nerves that is a human being. Or any other animal for that matter. *Nothing* about humanity is binary.

ARCHIVIST

…r-right. So, you work in computers, then.

TESSA

Sorry, I, um… it's been a while since I talked to someone in person? Been spending a lot of time in my own head, you know. Used to just dumping information when I get the chance. I have a blog, actually, but I haven't posted for almost a year. Almost too embarrassed to, now… Assuming I'm not losing my mind, of course!

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I hear that a lot, too.

TESSA

Well, that's what's terrifying, isn't it? Your mind is all you are, there's no backup, or you know, reset, If it goes. I'm not just talking about madness as it appears, but what it is from inside. The way people talk about it, it's like you have to think you're saying that our mind is everything we perceive, everything we are. That means you can never know when your grasp might be slipping. I'm not convinced that's it, though.

Or maybe deep down somewhere inside, you understand what's happening to you and – no. I am, I don't know which scares me more.

ARCHIVIST

Uh, look, I don't want to rush you –

TESSA

I've got a lot of friends whose retirement plans basically come down to uploading their minds into a computer and living forever in a virtual world. They're so sure it's just around the corner. I've never had the heart to tell them it's impossible – that the human brain is a wet mess of analog signal interpretation that is as far removed from the clean logics of digital processing as it's possible to be.

We've tricked ourselves into thinking that computers and people have anything in common? But no matter how good we may

program them to be at pretending to think like us, that's all we'll ever be. Crossing the line from meat and chemicals into pure digital systems is impossible. And everything else is just sophisticated programming and, and illusion.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, that's fascinating, Miss Winters, but I must politely ask you to start your statement.

TESSA

What do you think I've been doing?

ARCHIVIST

…traditionally, our concerns are with the particulars of the supernatural incident, its origins and manifestations.

TESSA

I'm giving you context.

ARCHIVIST

Right…

In that case, I still need to make the official notations.

Statement of Tessa Winters, regarding a strange computer program she downloaded from the Deep Web three months ago.

Is that accurate?

TESSA

[heh] Well, first off, I didn't find it on "the Deep Web" – god, it's like talking to my grandpa! Let me explain something quickly: any time someone tries to give you a line about the "the Deep Web," or even better, "the darknet," chances are they wouldn't know a VPN from their own ass. There's not some secret, sinister underbelly of the internet where, with the right passwords and double-talk, you can hack your way into a black market of assassins, drug lords, and secret forums.

It's just that some websites, well, we need to be a bit more security-minded, and need you to use the right, you know, software, so you're not monitored. – I mean, yes, there's drug stuff on there, but it's mostly just paranoid geeks who don't want to be caught pirating Photoshop.

ARCHIVIST

Noted.

Statement recorded direct from subject 7th January, 2017. Statement begins.

TESSA (STATEMENT)

Have you ever heard of Sergey Ushanka? I'd guess not. He's one of the less well-known online spook stories, and you don't look like you're a regular presence in the chatbot or neural net communities.

The story goes back to about 1983, during the first home computer

boom. There was this programmer by the name of Sergey Ushanka – I don't know if that's his real name, probably not… but, since a "ushanka" is a type of furry Russian hat, and he probably never actually existed… but, he was supposed to have been a real digital guru.

Well, according to the story, he, he got sick. In most versions it's, uh, it's brain cancer, but some say early-onset Alzheimer's, or some sort of undiagnosed brain infection. Point is, it was killing him, and it affected his brain.

Now, Sergey didn't want to die, the idea of death terrified him, and whatever was eating his mind gave him the idea to try and save his consciousness, to, um, to upload his brain.

Well, the next bit, it, um, depends on how ghoulish a version of the story you're told.

In some, he spends a fortune and every last hour of his last months trying desperately to code his own mind into his system, and he ends up lying dead at the keyboard, decomposing fingers still tapping away the last slivers of himself.

Other versions get a bit more grotesque. Handwritten code in his own blood feeding into the machine. I even heard one where he took the direct approach, removed the casing of his computer, carved off the top of his skull, and used the last ounces of his strength to impossibly shove his own deceased brain right into the circuitry.

Whatever version you're told, the story goes that it actually worked, and the police found a pile of floppy disks full of impossible code next to the mutilated body of Sergey Ushanka.

I'm sure you can guess the next bit. First on floppy disks, then later on CD, and eventually downloaded directly. Sergei Ushanka has been a running prank for people who like to code text parsers and chatbots. They're not unlike screamer videos, just a lot slower and, ideally, subtler.

You create a program which appears to be a chat window with a stranger who identifies themselves as Sergey. The responses should be as naturalistic as possible to begin with, and in the best ones it's hard to tell if you're talking to a bot for the first minute or two.

But then the responses start to break down, become more sinister, and keep referring to how much pain Sergey is in. Eventually, the only response the bot gives you is screaming and pleas to be released. The idea is that the chat bot is Sergey Ushanka's mind, and he doesn't like being in a computer nearly as much as he'd hoped. If it's well-executed, it can be genuinely quite unsettling.

But the only two consistent details across all of them are a particular image of a heavily-pixelated screaming face, and the phrase "the angles cut me when I try to think," which marks the start of the bot's descent into madness. Well, as far as I know these two things have been consistent right back to the earliest versions of Sergey Ushanka.

Like I say, it's quite a niche legend, but within certain communities, everyone's tried their hand at making a Sergey Ushanka at least once. Well, even I looked into it once or twice, and I'm on the fringes. I've done a few projects with basic neural nets, but I've never really tried my hand at a chatbot, and gave up after a couple of hours. I used to love them. The whole thing really hit my sweet spot between creepy and nerdy, and if I found myself up at 4:00 in the morning after watching too many YouTube ghost videos, I'd often go on the hunt for a new one.

So, when I got a notification from the bot group I'm part of, and it was just a link to a file named your "Ushanka's Despair.exe", I didn't hesitate. I downloaded it almost immediately. It was a bit disappointing to see it was a tiny file, barely over a megabyte. That didn't bode well for the experience, but I was still keen to give it a go later that night, when the ambience was better.

I looked back at the post, and saw that underneath it was comment after comment telling the OP that they'd posted a broken link. I shrugged it off at the time, but looking back I think I was probably the first person to click it, and the only one it worked for. Just unlucky, I guess.

I forgot about it for a while, but I didn't have anything scheduled for the next day, so I spent most of the evening drinking and messing about online. It was about two in the morning when I remembered what I had waiting in my downloads. I looked out the dark, empty street below, and a pleasing shiver run up my spine. I decided I was in the perfect mood to have a chat with Sergey

Ushanka.

Opening the program brought up a chat window. It wasn't like most of the others I'd seen; it looked closer to an old-school text adventure, with just a flashing line to indicate where to type your text, white on back. Aside from that, the window was empty.

I wasn't exactly sure what to do, as usually, the bot would make the first move, so I decided to go with a generic hello. There was no way the bots didn't have a response programmed for that.

I waited, but there didn't seem to be any response. That was fine. Often these things were programmed with waiting times to give the impression of thinking or composing a response. After about 15 seconds, I'm about to give it up as non-functional and close it, when the answer comes.

It's gibberish – just a mess of symbols and letters, like it was using the wrong characters. Some of them weren't even ASCII. I didn't have time to really process it, though, as they were generating quickly, and soon filled the whole screen.

They weren't static, either, but changing and scrolling, and um, and it's gonna sound weird and it was only for a moment, but I could have sworn I saw some of the symbols twitch? Like they were in pain?

It was making my eyes hurt to watch, and I started to feel dizzy… but I couldn't bring myself to look away.

Even then, I thought I was just looking at a very well-done horror set piece, especially when I started to notice a handful of English words popping into the wall of shifting text, for a second or two at a time. One of them read “helphelphelp”, all run together, and another, “it peels my mind like knives.”

My mouth was dry, and my hands were shaking, but even then all I could think was *[laugh]* how *good* this was. I was genuinely impressed by how unsettled it was making me.

It was the laptop’s fan that finally got me. I gradually realized that it wasn’t making its normal whirring sounds anymore. It had changed to something harsher, less healthy-sounding, like it was desperately trying to expel air? It sounded like someone breathing out diseased lungs, pushing and straining and, and never stopping to take anything back in.

It was only at that point that the possibility of malware really occurred to me. I didn’t know how it would make my laptop fans sound like that, but my computer wasn’t acting right. I tried to exit the program, and predictably enough, it wouldn’t close. So I crashed it, planning to have a look through in safe mode.

Sure enough, the lights went dark, and the groaning sounds of the fan died, but the white text on the screen wasn’t going anywhere.

Now, that, I knew was impossible. Or maybe there might have been some way to keep it frozen on the screen when the computer turned off, but to have it keep changing and morphing, when there was

clearly no power running through it? Well, if it's possible I don't know how you do it.

More words popped in and out of existence: "you wanted to talk" and "hihihihihi" over and over again.

Then all at once, the screen was filled with an image. It was grainy, like a very early webcam, and the camera appeared to be lying on a table looking up at a balding man. He appeared to be in his late 30s, I thought, and was shirtless, with a face frozen in pain or distress. Then he moved, and I realized that I must be watching a video file.

The man was crying. There was no sound, but I could see great heaving sobs that sent his whole body shuddering. He stared into a computer monitor, the edge of which I could just about see. He seemed to be sat in the dark, and his face was solely illuminated by the screen in front of him. I watched with mounting dread as the video continued. He reached down, to what I assumed would have been the keyboard, but he didn't seem to be typing.

Instead, there was a sudden jerking motion, and he raised his hand to reveal one of the keys, that he had apparently torn off. He brought it to his mouth, and began to eat it. I could just about make out the snap of his jaw, as the hard plastic shattered between his teeth. And as he reached for the next one, I could see a trickle of blood from his lips.

Well, that was more than enough for me. I slammed the laptop shut,

and pushed it away. I decided that whatever was ha-happening could wait until daylight. I turned on all the lights in my room and sat in an armchair drinking until I passed out, trying not to think about Sergey Ushanka.

I don't know how long I slept for, but it can't have been more than an hour or two, since it was still fully dark when I was woken by a snapping, crunching noise. I opened my eyes to see my TV screen on. It was showing that same video, the washed-out grainy blue making details almost impossible to distinguish, but there was noise now, coming through my speakers. I heard him crunching and eating the keys as he snapped them off, one by one.

I tried to figure out how the program could have jumped from my laptop to my TV, which wasn't plugged in or networked to it. The only thing they had in common was the router and, and that didn't make any sense, not unless someone was playing a really elaborate, really horrible prank on me, specifically. And I'm not the *nicest* person, but… I've never pissed anyone off that much.

All the time I was trying to figure this out, the video kept playing. The man's breathing was labored and painful, and he was talking, muttering to himself, or maybe to me. There was no way to tell.

I couldn't make out much through the mess he'd made of his mouth, and what I could hear, I didn't understand. He was talking about how "it feels like thinking through cheese wire," and "there's no feeling, but the no feeling hurts," and that "it's cold without blood."

He said that a lot. “It’s cold” and “it hurts.”

He spoke with a Russian accent. At one point, he stopped pulling at the keyboard, and reached out in front of him to where the monitor would be. There was a sound of breaking, and he pulled back a shard of glass. I don’t need to tell you what he did with it. The worst thing was, even though this meant the screen must have been shattered, somehow it was still illuminating his face.

I unplugged everything – the TV, the router, the speakers, everything. Well, that seemed to stop it, at least, at least for a while. I was in a bad way by this point, and I just left and wandered the streets until the sun came up. I didn’t take my phone, just… well, just in case.

That video was 17 hours long. I know this because it followed me until I watched all of it.

Any time I used a computer, watched TV, or looked too long at a screen, there it was. Didn’t matter if it was my own or someone else’s. After a few minutes, whatever I was looking at would melt away, and he’d be back, continuing to slowly, painfully eat his computer.

I tried to show it to a friend once, but he just looked at me like I was playing some weird joke. Only I could see it, apparently. I don’t want to be mad. I don’t think I am. But there’s no way really to know, is there?

After a month of this, I finally sat down and watched it through to

the end. It was the longest day of my life, and by the end, I felt so very sick, I almost threw up when he smiled. Finally, he laid down in front of the camera and said:

“The maze is sharp on my mind.”

“The angles cut me when I try to think.”

Then he stopped moving. I could see the top of his head then, and the back of it seemed to be missing.

The picture stayed like that for about half an hour, and then the video ended. I haven’t seen it since.

I keep thinking about the idea of uploading your mind into a computer. I said it was impossible. I still think it’s impossible, in the way we want it to be. But I can’t stop wondering what it must be like to try and have thoughts, messy human thoughts, trapped in the rigid digital processes of a computer.

It must hurt. Though not a sort of pain that we can understand.

Is that enough? Do you have what you need?

ARCHIVIST

I think… uh, yes. I think we do.

TESSA

The way you’re looking at me, I’m going to assume you don’t know anything more about this than I do.

ARCHIVIST

Not really, I'm afraid. I can talk you through some other encounters we've recorded with supposedly haunted computers, and I think one of our post-grad students is working on something about supernatural manifestations in technology, but I don't think we have anything else like this.

TESSA

Yeah, I figured. I just saw your post and thought, why not? And it does feel good to talk about it. You know?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I very much understand.

Oh! While I have you –

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

It looks like my posting on a few of the more tech-savvy boards appealing for statements has worked.

While the incident itself seems ultimately inconsequential, I was able to convince Tessa to have a look at Gertrude's laptop, claiming to have locked myself out. I don't know what she did – something about "command lines" and "administrative privileges" – but I now. Have. *Access.*

[slow exhale] I'm almost afraid –

[DOOR CREAKS]

TIM

Hey, where did you put the –

Oh. Sorry. Didn't mean to disturb you while you were being *suspicious* –

ARCHIVIST

It's fine.

TIM

No, no, I'll – catch you when you're not *scheming.*

[FOOTSTEPS WALKING AWAY]

ARCHIVIST

[quietly] No need to take that tone –

TIM

What?

ARCHIVIST

Nothing. I'll see you later –

TIM

No.

[SMALL CLUNK LIKE A CHAIR MOVING]

What did you say?

ARCHIVIST

I said there's no need for the attitude, I *know* things have been difficult, but –

TIM

Oh, they have, have they? *"Things* have been difficult?" You've spent a *month* staring at that footage – double-checking every moment, timing every tea break, looking at me like I somehow staged it – but no! You're right: *"Things* have been difficult."

ARCHIVIST

It just seems a little too convenient!

TIM

Excuse me!?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, the CCTV is so corrupted that the police can't just use it immediately, and then they *happen* to finish restoring it just when I start really digging into the murder!? And if it was an option, why not clean it up when she first disappeared!?

And don't get me started on the lack of cameras in the Archives – I know, I know Elias's whole *spiel* about "signal degradation" and "installation issues," but I don't *buy* it. I mean, he got the CO2 system put in easily enough –

TIM

Shut. Up.

ARCHIVIST

What –

TIM

Shut up. Just *stop talking.* I'm sick of this. I'm sick of *you! We* didn't kill Gertrude, and no one wants to kill you, you pompous idiot!

ARCHIVIST

Now, listen here –

TIM

No. No. *You* listen, for once. I was fine in research. *Happy.* Then you asked me to be transferred here and suddenly it's all monsters and killers and secret passages, *oh my!*

And the worst thing – the *actual* worst thing – is that *no one* here has my back. With any of it! Elias doesn't care, Martin just wants a tea party, and Sasha – ugh – and *you!* – you're treating me like I'm somehow to blame for it all, like I didn't suffer the worst right alongside you!

ARCHIVIST

Well, excuse me if my experiences have made me –

TIM

Your experiences? *Fuck* you, I got eaten by worms because of you!

ARCHIVIST

Well, what do you want? You want *sympathy?*

TIM

You know what, yeah! Little bit of basic sympathy would have been nice!

ARCHIVIST

Jane Prentiss was *not* my fault, I did *not* bring her to the Archives –

TIM

Oh, but you went off the deep end afterwards, didn't you!? Everything went to hell – and when you actually needed to be in charge, you just *hid* down here and played with your tape recorder –

ARCHIVIST

Well, what would you have me do!?

TIM

Anything! Anything that wasn't turning into a paranoid lunatic would have been fine! Anything that showed you could actually *do your job!*

ARCHIVIST

Well, *[nervous faux-laugh] Elias* clearly thinks –

TIM

Elias should've fired you weeks ago!

ARCHIVIST

What!?

TIM

After everything you've pulled, you should be *gone.* But no! Instead, we all get to talk about how *you're* feeling, because we're *worried*

about our *stalker boss.* I, I can't do this anymore!

ARCHIVIST

Then *quit.*

If you hate it so much, leave your post in the Archives.
Permanently.

TIM

Are you *firing* me?

ARCHIVIST

…I'm offering you a chance to quit. No notice period, I'll even make sure you get the rest of the month's paycheck.

Just say the words.

[PAUSE]

TIM

I want to…

ARCHIVIST

So do it.

TIM

I…

Can't.

ARCHIVIST

Why not?

TIM

I, I *can't!* I don't know – *why* can't I quit!?

ARCHIVIST

I-I don't know. But I don't think I can fire you either…

TIM

What?

ARCHIVIST

It's this place.

TIM

…I don't understand.

ARCHIVIST

Neither do I. I'm trying to figure it out, I-I've got the shape of it, but…

I'm sorry, Tim. Truly I am. But I cannot and will not trust you. This place isn't right – you see that now. I don't know how or why, but there is something *very wrong* with the Archives. And I don't know

who here is a victim of it – and who is an agent.

TIM

So… What do we *do?*

ARCHIVIST

For now…? I suppose we just… do our jobs.

TIM

I don't want to.

ARCHIVIST

No.

TIM

…I, um, suppose I'll see you later.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose so.

[DOOR CREAKS]

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG066 – Held In Customs

Statement #0002202

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Vincent Yang regarding his claimed imprisonment by Mikaele Salesa.

Original statement given February 22nd, 2000. Recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

He drugged me. Obviously he drugged me, that's the only explanation that makes sense. It was the only way he could get me in there, and drugs can affect how you see all sorts of things, even time.

It's just, it felt so real. I felt every second, and I checked my watch, and – but I've taken all sorts of drugs in my life, I experimented plenty with psychedelics in my youth, and this didn't feel like being drugged. It felt like being eaten. No, not eaten, entombed.

It was his own damned fault. I've been working customs long

enough and we all know the drill, he should too. You bust the sloppy ones, you bust the ones you think might involve whatever the higher-ups are coming down on hard that month, but most smugglers are small fry. You keep your paperwork in order and we'll keep out of your way as long as you give us the same courtesy.

I knew that Mikhail shipped through Portsmouth all the time. I never dealt with the man directly, but he should have made sure to keep his documents clean. As it was, I had to hold his shipment. Not enough grounds for an immediate full search, I made that clear to him – but if he didn't get his papers in order quickly, we'd have no choice.

I still remember how he stared at me, stood in that shipping container surrounded by flight cases and sealed metal boxes. That level, even stare. He was appraising me like some sort of antique. Like he was curious what my value might be at auction. Then his face turned to a scowl of irritation, and he gestured widely to his cargo, offering me the chance to examine it if I thought him a criminal.

His voice was deep, calm, and measured, but his eyes had an anger in them that scared me. I looked around the container, not so much to look at the contents, but just to avoid his gaze.

Truth be told, I hated my job. It wears you down to be someone whom nobody wants to see. Smugglers and traffickers hate me because I threatened to disrupt their business, I understand that, but legitimate operators look at me in the exact same way, because they

know that an error on the manifest can be far more important than whether they've got 2 kilos of heroin hidden in the boot of an imported car.

I began to walk around, giving a cursory examination to the assortment of mismatched boxes surrounding Salesa. I didn't open anything, I didn't want to. I just wanted to make a small show of the fact that I could. It was the 18th of January, about a month ago, and the container was ice-cold. Fiddling around with locks and fastenings would have needed me to take my gloves off, and that wasn't happening.

Salesa stood there in a tank top and unbuttoned shirt, seemingly oblivious to the chill. If he was trying to make some show of toughness or bravado, then to be honest, it was working. I had no interest in crossing this man.

More important though, was the fact that smuggled antiques was so far down the list of priorities at that point that from a career point of view, bending down to stare at some flight case full of incorrectly declared pottery was a complete waste of my time.

I sighed, got my feet, and as I did so I grabbed the edge of an old wooden crate to the support. I felt the lid shift slightly under my weight. I looked at it a bit closer and couldn't help but notice it didn't seem to have any bolts or locks on it and the lid clearly hadn't been nailed shut.

I reached over to try and slide it back into place, but my gloved

hand slipped and as I tried to grip it I swear I barely touched the thing, but the wooden top slid further off, releasing a dusty cloud of air that sent me into a coughing fit. The air was dry and hot in a way that seemed rather alarming in the frigid shipping container. The inside was dark, the light from the entrance not reaching this far back. I shined my light in and to my surprise the crate appeared to be completely empty. I didn't remember it listed on the manifest but if it didn't contain anything there wasn't necessarily a reason for it to be.

I turned back to face Salesa with a shrug. He no longer looked angry. Instead, his face now had a look of concern. I assumed he was worried I'd found something suspicious, but I shook my head and told him that if he got his documents in order by tomorrow he could be on his way no problem. Otherwise it was going to get more complicated. The look on his face didn't change.

I began to walk out, I had to plenty more work to do that day, when he grabbed my arm. His grip was just as strong as I would have guessed and for a second I was suddenly afraid he was going to kill me. Instead, he looked me in the eyes for a long moment before he said very softly, "don't go to sleep".

I shook my head, assuming that was meant to be some sort of threat, and gave him a look that tried to tell him I wasn't scared. Of course I was, but either way he didn't seem to notice he just looked at me and repeated himself.

I was understandably nervous after that little encounter but I live in

a ground-floor flat in a rather rough area, so I have several locks, a sturdy door, and bars on the window, all of which I triple-checked before turning in that night. Everything seemed to be an order so I had a few shots of vodka to calm my nerves and, well, I turned in.

Looking back on it now, the thing I find hardest to believe is how well I slept. It was a restful night's sleep and I didn't dream. The pain in my legs was what woke me. The dull cramp dragged me slowly from unconsciousness, and I tried to shift them into a more comfortable position under the covers.

As I tried I gradually realized that I couldn't. They were pressed right up against a hard surface. My eyes began to flutter open and I realized that instead of my pillow, my cheek was pressed against something coarse and rigid, something that, when I tried, to move greeted me with the needling sharpness of splinters.

It was dark. Opening my eyes didn't do much to change what I could see. My hands pressed against unvarnished wood and I felt a rising panic in the back of my mind. I think deep down I already knew exactly where I was but I still tried, steadily, one at a time, to move every limb and part of my body, hoping desperately that one of them would pass out into open air and reassure me that I wasn't trapped within that small wooden cube. But I could barely move any of them and it soon became apparent that my prison was indeed a sturdy wooden crate.

I started to shout for help then. The sound was jarring the echo muted by the close confines of the walls, and my cries seemed

incredibly loud to me. I called out again and again but nobody came. After a few minutes I suddenly had the horrid thought that maybe I had been buried alive, and I might have limited air. That shut me up very quickly, and instead I started to listen closely for any sound of movement. Nothing.

You know it's strange, it took me a long time to make the connection with the crate I'd stopped at the cross and Salesa's shipping container. I was so disorientated by my awakening that the idea that this was his doing took a surprisingly long time to come. Once it did, though, I began to feel rage building. I had the memory of the lid that hadn't been secured and taking a moment to orientate myself, I began to push up on the wood directly above me.

It didn't budge a millimeter. Either it had been nailed down or someone had placed a heavy weight on top of it, or both. I started to thrash around at that point, desperate to escape but this only earned me more splinters.

I suppose I was lucky that it was winter. The thick pajamas I slept in, that I was apparently still wearing, protected me from a lot of it. At the thought of winter I began to notice the heat. It was hot in that tiny cell, a closed humid heat that caused sweat to trickle gently down my neck and my throat to gradually turn ragged and raw.

I could do nothing but sit there, cramped and desperate, and feel that stifling oppressive heat thrum around me.

Everything about it was stifling and oppressive. I have never suffered from claustrophobia before but it didn't take long for it to set in and for a while I gave in to blind panic, muttering to myself and hyperventilating in shallow gasping breaths of hot, sticky air.

The thing that finally brought me out of it was the realization that if I'd been breathing so hard and for so long but was still conscious, that must mean there was airflow and that I wasn't completely buried alive. That sudden moment of relief ended abruptly though, when I swear I felt the box get smaller.

It was a slight movement, barely a centimeter, but I felt it in a jolt of pain along my leg. That the crate had decided to punish me for my moment of hope. After a while, the cramps that had been so agonizing to begin with began to fade in and out. It's not that it stopped hurting, far from it, but it became such a constant pain that I could ignore it for long periods of time before it washed back over me in a wave of screaming muscles.

It was in such a window of normality, but I realized I was able to see my arms. There was light. It seemed to be seeping through the small gaps in the wood, barely enough to see by normally, but my eyes had grown very accustomed to the dark. It looked like sunlight. I must have been outside but I had no idea where I might be.

Near my head, a slightly larger space between the wooden slats let in a thin beam of sunlight near my head. I shifted, my neck protesting the movement, but for a single moment I felt it on my

face. That sunlight, the dream of freedom. Then the box closed the gap with a shudder and squeezed me a bit tighter for daring to do so.

Still, I knew I was outside, and I knew I had air, so I tried once again to scream for help. I pleaded, I shouted, I felt my dry lips crack from the force of my screams. I kept going until my voice was nothing but a hoarse whisper and then I collapsed back into despair and terror.

At 11:56 I realized I could see my watch. I wasn't in a habit of taking it off at bed, and the position I had been forced into left it just about visible in the dim light. It was surprisingly little comfort, as the hours that had passed by in a hazy blur of pain and fear now ticked by with an awful slowness.

Even so, it grounded me, kept me focused on something real. The minutes and hours passed same as they would have outside the box, and this more than anything convinced me that I was neither dreaming or mad.

At 9:45, the light began to disappear and I was once again in darkness. I slept then, fitfully and in great pain, and when I woke back up to find myself still trapped there, I cried. Even as I did so, in the back of my mind I hated myself for wasting what water I might have left in me.

Four days I was in there, at least if the darkness and light really was night and day. I used to be religious and I tried to pray several

times, but the words felt hollow on my dry, desperate lips. I called out to God, then later to the devil, and finally to Salesa himself. None of them answered.

I knew that that was where I was going to die, trapped and alone. I wondered if they would ever find me. Was I somewhere where the stench of my rot might bring some poor soul to investigate? Probably not if my screams couldn't be heard but maybe someone would find me. Maybe they would join me if the box was still hungry.

It was thoughts like these that played endlessly through my mind, round and round like a feverish thirsty carousel. Then all at once it was over. I awoke to hear the sounds of wood shifting above me. I barely had time to register what was happening before frigid, icy air washed over me and the torchlight was shining in my face.

I blinked hard as I started to make out two figures above me. One was Salesa, staring at me with an expression of curiosity, the other I didn't know though I vaguely recognized him as one of the captains that made port here occasionally. Captain Larell, maybe, or Lukas? I don't really remember.

He looked at me then over to Salesa, shrugged, and handed him a 20 pound note before turning around and walking out of the shipping container, which I saw I was once again inside.

Salesa lifted me gently out of the box being careful, I noted, not to touch the sides. Moving my legs was like walking on knives, but I

managed to stumble out, overjoyed at my freedom. I felt Salesa push some papers into my hands. An updated manifest he told me, and sent me on my way.

I spent that day trying to get some life back into my tortured, atrophied muscles and slowly drinking water. I ignored my work completely and ended the day by handing in my notice.

Do you know what date was on my letter of resignation? The 19th of January, the day after I had first seen Salesa. My watch no longer matched the clock in the break room. I don't know why the night was so much longer for me, or why it boiled me with the sun in the middle of winter.

I must have been drugged. Salesa must have drugged me. It's the only rational explanation. But I know that he didn't.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Another tale of the elusive Mikaele Salesa dealing in all sorts of artefacts without any decent safety measures. Unless that's the point, of course.

And if I'm not mistaken, it would appear he's at least acquainted with Captain Peter Lukas of the *Tundra.* Whatever this grand game is, Salesa is definitely involved. I just wish I knew whether he was a player, or a pawn, or something else entirely.

Surprisingly, it seems comprehensive shipping records are harder

for Tim to flirt his way into than police reports, and Sasha has had her own issues with trying to access the electronic records. If there is official documentation of this particular shipment that might verify Mr. Yang's story, we're not able to obtain them.

Martin encountered a different problem tracking down Mr. Yang himself. Apparently, he's retired now and living with his children, who were surprisingly cooperative in allowing Martin to see him. He's also in the later stages of early-onset Alzheimer's disease. He could provide no new useful information, and Martin left after Mr. Yang became acutely distressed at the mention of boxes.

All in all, a dead end. If this was the first time Mikaele Salesa turned up in our files, I would definitely agree with Mr. Yang's own assessment, but by now there are far too many cases to chalk them all up to drugs.

Whatever Salesa deals in is, I suspect, infinitely more dangerous.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

Gertrude's laptop has been rather interesting. Unfortunately, nothing along the lines of "My Murderer.avi". She didn't keep any sort of diary from what I can see. In fact, it doesn't look like she kept many documents at all. A few budget spreadsheets and work forms, but I get the feeling she wasn't much of a note-taker.

The thing that is interesting in the budget spreadsheet is the rather large amount she requested for travel. What's even stranger is that it seems the budget was approved.

Her internet history and emails reveals some more pertinent information. It looks like she did do a lot of travel, all over the world, far further than the single basement one would expect an archivist to keep to. And in these cases, at least, she kept the receipts and the booking information. Nairobi, Wichita, Budapest, Shanghai – the list goes on. No records as far back as '98, of course, but given the pattern, I don't think a trip to Alexandria is at all out of the question.

There's also the matter of the products she was ordering. There are several online orders of petrol, lighter fluid, pesticides, and high-powered torches. They are sporadic, but notable in that she did not drive, smoke, or work in pest control. The torches would make sense if it wasn't for the quantities in which she ordered them. She also sent orders for a staggering array of filing tabs, labels, and index markers, all different makes, formats, and systems, most of which I have encountered in various forms around the archives.

Given that the doddering old lady image is now dispelled in its

entirety, I cannot help but wonder if there is a reason she was keeping the files in disarray. I'm not convinced she would approve of my efforts to organize them.

Part of me is tempted to follow her lead and suspend my explorations, but the more I find out about Gertrude, the less I am inclined to trust her, and I am not sure emulating her is the wisest course of action. Especially given the three most alarming purchases I found in her history.

Gertrude Robinson was trying to buy Leitners. Seeing the account name grbookworm1818 gave me a particularly hollow laughs. Obvious when you're looking for it, I suppose.

It looks like she managed to get hold of three books: a special printing of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture,* by John Ruskin; that rather dubious copy of *The Key of Solomon,* and a 1910 pamphlet simply entitled *A Disappearance.* I am quite sure none of them are in the archives, and they weren't in her flat, either. I rather hope she destroyed them, especially as *The Key of Solomon* is something of an almanac on demonology, but my luck isn't that good.

All told, the laptop has given me much cause for concern, and little in the way of hard evidence. The more I learn about Gertrude, the more I respect her, and the more I worry about her motives.

Perhaps I've been focusing on the wrong question, and the most important thing isn't who killed her, but why.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG067 – Burning Desire

Statement #0071803

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Jack Barnabas, regarding a short-lived courtship with Agnes Montague in the autumn of 2006. Original statement given March 18, 2007. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I knew she wasn't normal. I think that's what originally drew me to her. I thought she was just like me, another weirdo cast off from the world. I mean, there was no way I could have known she wasn't human. At least, I don't see how she can have been human – not the way we think of it.

But she was so beautiful. She, she was tall, with long, straight, auburn hair and these eyes that, when they looked at you, it didn't feel like she was seeing you so much as was trapping you. I never understood the phrase "like a deer in the headlights" until she looked me in the eyes for the first time. I don't know – maybe

something in my fight-or-flight reflex is screwed up, because those weren't the instincts I felt when it happened.

I should have run, of course. I don't know if you normally leave people alone in a room when they write their statements, but I can understand you doing so in my case. I'm getting used to people making polite excuses not to look at me.

Deliah tried to warn me off. Deliah Aconjo had worked in the Canyon Cafe ever since it opened in 1991, and as soon as I headed back into the kitchen after I saw Agnes Montague for the first time, she spotted the look in my eyes and shook her head. She told me she was trouble, that there was something not right about her. I asked for more details and Deliah just shrugged. Said that she'd been coming into the cafe ever since it opened, and that there was something off.

At the time, I assumed that she meant Agnes had been coming in ever since she was a child, as she looked about my age. But looking back, I'm not so sure.

It wasn't as though we would have made any difference. I was drawn to her in a way I can't even explain. I could never bring myself to say anything, or even make a sound, when her eyes fell on me.

I barely had enough wherewithal to confirm her order, even though it was always the same: a large cup of black coffee with enough room for milk. She never actually put any milk in it. She never even

drank it. She'd just take it over and sit there, staring out the window into the street for an hour or so. It wasn't like there was much of a view, just a normal street, and outside Sheffield city centre, that's not much of a view at all.

Still, she'd sit there, staring, alone with her thoughts, for about an hour, then stand up and leave. I'd go over to clear away her coffee. It was always scalding hot.

It was such a strange little routine, and I would spend time wondering to myself what she could possibly be thinking about. What was her life, that every Tuesday at 3:00 in the afternoon, she came into the same cafe and didn't drink a black coffee? The way she always used to order the coffee, it always sounded like she was enjoying it. The order, I mean. Like the phrase "one black coffee with room for milk" was a delightfully novel thing for her to say.

In the year and a bit leading up to my finally talking to her, I only ever saw two occasions when she wasn't sitting alone.

The first was when another man attempted to chat her up. At least, I assume that's what he was doing. I didn't recognize him, but you can always tell when someone starts a conversation with a motive like that. He walked over and started saying something or other, cocky as anything. Agnes – though I didn't know her name back then – just looked up and met his eyes. I could see him start to falter. Sweat began to roll down his forehead, but he kept talking. Then Agnes went to stand up.

It was only a very small movement, but the man started as though a gun had gone off, knocking into the table and spilling coffee all over his hand. It had been sat there almost 40 minutes, but I could see his flesh start to redden with burns where the liquid had touched it. He screamed, and suddenly all eyes were on him. His face went almost the same color as his burned hand, and he shouted something vague at us, about suing us over the temperature, and ran out the door in pain and embarrassment. Suffice it to say we did not hear from his lawyers.

That was the day I noticed the slight scorch marks on the chair Agnes had been sat on – though at the time I didn't connect the two.

The other time was about near the end of October last year. I remember because Deliah had been ranting at me about how impossible it was to get a decent woman's Halloween costume that didn't, as she put it, show a mile of skin. I was making some weak joke about going as a bedsheet ghost, and telling everyone it was sexy because the ghost was technically naked, when I looked over and saw someone else sat at the table with Agnes.

She was a short Asian woman, with close-cropped hair and a thick, muscular frame. I remember being a bit surprised that she seemed to be just wearing a tank top, given how cold it was starting to get. But it did show off a rather intimidating back tattoo of what looked to be a man wreathed in the fires of hell. I still remember how disconcerting I found that screaming face, contorting in the agony of inked-on fire.

Weirder than all that, though, was the fact that Agnes appeared to be talking to her. Actually saying words that weren't in order for coffee or a thank you. Her voice was soft, and I couldn't make out any of the words. I mean, I know I shouldn't have been trying to listen, I know it's a creepy thing to do, but you don't understand how momentous an occasion this was: to see this beautiful woman whose name I didn't know finally talking to another human being. It was incredible.

The shorter woman's voice was loud, though, and she made no attempt at subtlety in her conversation. She was talking about some sort of job, and whether Agnes was going to be able to do it. At first, I thought it was a job interview, and then she started talking about Agnes being "released" from something.

Agnes just said something softly, and shook her head. She looked sad, an expression I'd never seen on her face before.

The other woman sighed, clearly unhappy with the answer, and stood up to leave. Before she went, she took out a brown paper envelope and handed it over. Said that she'd give it to her now, so she didn't forget later. She called it "a collection." It looked like the envelope might have been full of money.

Agnes put it in her jacket and returned to staring out the window, as her intimidating companion left with a frustrated expression. That was the moment I decided to try and talk to Agnes. Seeing her interact with someone else, even in such a weird way, unblocked something in my mind.

The following Tuesday, when she came in and ordered her coffee, I asked her name. She looked at me in surprise, and for a second I felt like I'd made a terrible mistake. But then she told me, very matter-of-factly. And then I asked her out on a date. I don't know how it happened, it just tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop it.

There was a moment of absolute silence, like everyone in the place had stopped breathing – though nobody had looked up. Then Agnes'S face twisted into something I *think* was a smile, and she said yes. A wave of giddy joy just washed right over me, and she took her coffee and went to her normal table.

I could feel Deliah staring at me from the kitchen, and I didn't want to turn around, because I knew exactly the face she'd be making. I was too happy to let her ruin it with her muttered predictions of disaster. It was only after Agnes had left her undrunk coffee and headed out to wherever she went that I realized we'd never made any actual arrangements.

I spent the next day in a funk, kicking myself for having been so stupid. I have Wednesdays off work, so there was plenty of time to mope around the house feeling sorry for myself. About 3:00 in the afternoon, though, there was a knock on the door.

Standing on the other side was Agnes. She was dressed in a dark woolen coat and gray scarf, and had that same sort-of-smile on her face. She asked if I was ready to go.

I was very much not. I asked her to wait a minute, as I ran back to my room to put on some deodorant and a clean shirt. It was as I was doing this that I noticed kind of an odd smell, like when you turn on an electric heater for the first time in a while, and you get a whiff of all the burning dust. I looked up and noticed within the corner of the room, where there had been a spider's web this morning, there was just a faint wisp of smoke. It was weird, but I had more important things on my mind. As soon as I was ready, I headed out.

I asked her what she wanted to do, and she looked at me like I was stupid. We were going to walk in the park, she said. Like it was the only possible thing to do. Of course, I agreed. She was the strangest person I had ever met, but something about it just charmed me. So we went down to Bolehill Park, the nearest one to my flat, and we walked.

I did most of the talking, as you might have expected. I don't even remember half the things I said now, just a meaningless babble of thoughts, personal details, anecdotes. I worried I was boring her, but every time I looked over, she had that same expression on, which by then I was *pretty* sure was a smile. I'd catch her eye, and that feeling would flood through me. I still don't know quite how to describe it, but whatever it was, it was powerful.

We sat on a bench as the sun went down, watching the sky redden, and Agnes asked me a question. It was the first time she'd said anything more than a few words since we left my flat. She asked me if I had a destiny.

I don't need to tell you the question caught me off guard. I don't know if I've given the impression clearly enough yet, being a single guy in my early thirties still working the till at a Sheffield cafe, but I don't really see myself as having much of a destiny. Hell, I'm not even sure I believe in destiny. I certainly don't believe in God, and I feel that's kind of linked.

So I told her this. She looked at me, with the same sadness I'd seen on her face before. "That must be nice," she said and went back to staring into the sunset.

We went out several times after that. Each time, she'd show up at my door unannounced and tell me what we were going to do. We went to the park a couple more times, had a meal in an Italian restaurant where she didn't eat anything. We even went to see a film. I remember it was *The Prestige,* and when I asked her her thoughts on it, she just told me she hadn't been watching. God, she was so bizarre. *[laugh]*

The last date was November the 23rd, 2006. It was a Thursday, and the chill had really hit. It was too cold to spend an evening in the park, to be honest, but Agnes had decided that's what we had to do, so that's what we did. She never seemed to feel the cold.

We'd walked in silence for about an hour, and it had gotten dark. I was about to suggest we leave, as they usually closed the park after nightfall. I heard Agnes gasp. I turned to see her gripping her chest, as though in sudden pain, and she told me we had to go. I followed her as she staggered out of the park and over to a phone booth,

where she made a panicked call.

She said something about a tree falling, and that they had to finish something. Then she hung up. She leaned on my arm as we walked back to her flat. I'd never been there before, but it was clear she couldn't make it unassisted.

The building was old, and the wallpaper of the corridor was a faded green lily pattern, occasionally scarred with a vivid hole burnt into it. As we approached her door, I saw a small group of people gathered around it, waiting. I recognized the woman she had been talking to several weeks before, but the others were strangers to me. They were all dressed in rough work clothes and wore severe expressions.

One of them, a big guy with a shaved head, was holding an unlit lantern, and speaking to the others in a language that I think was Spanish or Portuguese. Another held a bag that seemed to be full of candles, while a third had a clear plastic container filled with hundreds of tiny spiders. None of them paid me any attention, and I was rapidly feeling like I was falling into something that I really didn't want to.

Agnes turned to me and apologized. Told me "goodbye," and "thank you." There was such a sense of finality to it that I felt like my heart stopped.

I should have left. I should have turned around and walked back the way I'd come and accepted that I'd never see her again. Instead, I

did the stupidest thing I've ever done. There, caught up in a series of events that I didn't understand but that terrified me, and drowning in emotions that I still can't explain, I asked if I could kiss her.

Without warning, she put her hands either side of my head. I realized it was the first time our skin had ever touched, and I could feel the intense, hellish heat that radiated from inside her. But it was too late. She leaned in and kissed me.

There are no words to describe the pain. My face erupted in boiling agony as I felt my skin start to crack and peel, and the heat washed over me, erasing all thoughts in blistering white. I felt the fat in my cheeks liquefy and bubble as I tried to scream, but my lips wouldn't work.

I fell to the floor. The last memory I have, before waking up in the hospital, was a single tear dropping onto my hand. A tiny, sizzling pang of torment that still somehow managed to cut through.

When I awoke three days later in the hospital, Agnes was dead. The police came and took my statement, but they had already decided it was a suicide, and when I tried to tell them what had happened, they looked at me like I was making it all up. At least, when they could stand to look at me at all.

The doctors did their best, and repeatedly told me that actually, I was very lucky, as whatever fire I had put my face in should by rights have blinded me as well. It wasn't exactly a comfort.

I lost almost everything after that. I never had much to begin with, and after I was let go at the cafe, I couldn't afford to keep my home. They didn't even try to pretend it wasn't because my burned face would scare away customers. I've ended up living with my father again, who has been… understanding about the situation, though even he can't bring himself to meet my eye most days.

The worst part is, looking back, I'm still not sure what I would have done differently, or if I'd do it all again. Even after everything the police told me about her death, and the hand, I, I don't know if I would have had it in me to resist. I just couldn't avoid being drawn in, like a moth to the flame.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

A rather different perspective on the woman known as Agnes Montague, or Agnes Fielding, depending on who you ask. Although hardly a reliable account, steeped as it is in messy obsessions and confusion.

Still, if the bald man with the lantern is, as I suspect, Diego Malina, it would indicate a link between his notable obsession with burning, and Agnes, who apparently had not-inconsiderable abilities in that area.

I can't help but wonder if Arthur Nolan, the Hive's landlord, was one of the other members of that little group. I do not know if they have a name, as such, but given the evidence of organization and

the indications of worship, I have started to refer to them in my notes as the Cult of the Lightless Flame. And I believe they may also be connected to the ritual circle found in Scotland by Jason North.

I've been, as yet, unable to find any other details on them with the information I have.

Most of the information here has already been covered, following the account of Agnes's time in Hill Top Road, but Martin has been able to make contact with Mr. Barnabas by email. He's apparently been doing much better in the years since his statement, having received some reasonably-successful plastic surgery. He was unable to provide much more information than the above, but upon Martin's asking if Agnes had mentioned her childhood at all, he did recall her briefly alluding to being adopted.

Tim also got in contact with Deliah Aconjo, who confirmed what we had suspected: the woman known as Agnes Montague had visited the Canyon Cafe for a decade and a half, apparently without aging a day.

I'm now convinced this is the same Agnes who grew up in Hill Top Road, though exactly what she is, or why she seemed to retain her youth remains a mystery. Like everything else around here. Still, she is dead, as is Diego Malina. I can only hope that prevents them from causing further problems.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ELIAS

John, there's nothing down there.

ARCHIVIST

No, that's not true, I told you what happened.

ELIAS

You told me you wandered around in the dark for hours at a time, shortly after suffering an incredibly traumatic experience.

ARCHIVIST

So you're saying I imagined it.

ELIAS

It's a possibility. The other possibility is there's something *very* dangerous down there. Neither makes me particularly inclined to unlock it.

ARCHIVIST

So what do you plan to do about it, send someone else?

ELIAS

We really don't have the budget for that –

ARCHIVIST

So, nothing. You're just going to leave it.

ELIAS

For now, I think that's for the best.

ARCHIVIST

Please, Elias I *need to know.*

ELIAS

[sigh] You really think that this will help?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Yes, it's getting harder and harder to work down there without being sure… what's underneath me. So either give me the key, or find a new Archivist.

ELIAS

Oh, good lord, don't be so dramatic, John. You know how hard it would be to replace you.

ARCHIVIST

I, I don't actually? But… thank you, I suppose.

ELIAS

I'll have a copy made for you on one condition: *be careful.* No more impetuous subterranean adventures. Understand?

ARCHIVIST

Of course, of course. Understood.

ELIAS

And for God's sake, get some sleep.

[CLICK]

MAG068 – The Tale of a Field Hospital

Statement #0030306

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Joseph Russo regarding a book allegedly authored by Sir Frederick Treeves. Original statement given June 3rd, 2003. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Thanks for letting me do this. I mean, I know you let anyone record a statement. That's why you're the Magnus Institute! So I could have just made something up, I guess. But I don't want to waste your time or irritate you guys. I mean, I'm a big fan of your work. Never had the academic chops to get access to your library or anything, but when all those statements were leaked back in '99… I know all the letters pages called you crackpots, but I know. Yeah? I get it. I read them all, start to finish, and sure there's a lot of nonsense in there, a lot of bad acid trips and liars, but in the middle, at the core of them, there was something there. There are

things that go bump in the night and now I think I've got one to share with you.

So I'm kind of an artist. I like to use the detritus of mankind's time on this planet to craft its own reflection back at itself, yeah? So I take what others consider garbage and use it to send a message to the puppetmasters and fat cats who hold our lives in the palm of their hand and play with our society like a chess game. A message of art. You know what I'm talking about. I bet you have a ton in your archive about the Illuminati. That's why they smeared you so hard. I'm not asking to look at them or anything; I'm just letting you know that I get it. Yeah? I get it.

So, anyway, I spend a lot of time at the dump. Not so much those huge iron skips or the bottle bank – I mean, like I don't have enough bottles in my studio already – but you know the bit in the middle where they sell stuff. All the stuff that really skirts the line between trash and treasure. Mirrors that are tarnished but still good. Old furniture just a bit too scuffed for the charity shop. You can get amazing things there for almost nothing if you look hard and aren't too picky.

And when you're making art, you don't need to be picky. If something's not perfect, you can make it perfect. You use the beauty inside of you to reach in and pull the beauty out of the object. Sometimes by breaking it more; sometimes by repairing it just enough. And, once, by setting it on fire. So the people at the dump around my area they know me and generally when I turn up they key me in to any of the good stuff that's come in.

So, I was checking out the tip near Wood Green two days ago and they don't usually have a lot of good stuff. I mean, I've been there sometimes when there's literally no stuff out for sale but this time they had a few furniture pieces and a cutlery set, but nothing I could use. But one of the guys who works there, I think his name's Gus. Or Al. He looks like a Gus or an Al.

Anyway, he pointed me to the only thing that really caught my attention. It was a wicker basket full of old books. Now this I was interested in. I'm working on a piece at the moment, it's called 'Pageviews' and it's about the death of print media at the dawn of the digital age. Point is, I'm filling a bunch of computer monitors with shredded books, so cheap books, especially a bit old and a bit yellowed, were exactly what I needed.

I discarded a few of them, as the texture or page tone wasn't quite right, but there were plenty in there I could use. Then I spotted a book that looked a bit older than the others, right at the bottom. It was large, and the pages looked thick and loose. It was titled *The Tale of a Field Hospital,* by Frederick Treeves.

So clearly I'm buying it, right? I mean, obviously you know Frederick Treeves, the surgeon who was best friends with Joseph Merrick, AKA the Elephant Man, AKA my all-time favourite Victorian medical curiosity. And not just because he shares my name, though I guess that doesn't hurt.

I mean, I knew about the book; Treeves' account of his time working in a field hospital during the Second Boer War. I'd read it

before, of course, but my copy had gone missing about the time Sandra moved out. She wasn't exactly a fan, and I think she threw away a whole bunch of my stuff out of spite. Thing is, this one looked old. Like, 19th century old, which, since that's when he was writing meant there was a good chance it was a first edition and that sort of thing can be very valuable. Meaning I get a good read and a payday. Win-win, right?

So I buy it, for like 50p and head off, but it's weird. Don't know who owned it before, might have even have been a library copy but the sticker was mostly torn off. It didn't have a frontispiece, though, and a lot of the pages had different ink weights or layouts, and it kind of looks like they were printed at different times.

It's only when I get home that I remember *The Tale of a Field Hospital* was actually based on a series of short columns he wrote for the *British Medical Journal* during the war itself. So I reckon what I've got here might just be some kind of proofing or draft copy, or maybe some custom-bound collection of those articles, and I get really excited.

As I started reading through it, though, there was something kind of weird. Bits of some of the chapters that I really don't remember from the version I read before. The book's old and dirty and kind of tricky to just read, so I copied down a few passages for you.

So, almost halfway through, Chapter Thirteen, he talks about "The Men with the Spades" – the soldiers who came up every day to dig the graves for those who had died in the hospital. He describes

them as “unkempt and uncaring, their devil-may-care attitude hiding the deep sadness within them at their solemn duty”. Except, in the version I have, it goes like this:

Archivist’s note: attached to this statement at various points are handwritten versions of passages allegedly from the book in question.

> “The graves at Frere were dug by our own men, or rather, by a small fatigue party from a regiment nearby. Nearly every morning they came, the men with the spades. There were seven of them, with a corporal, and they came up jauntily, with their spades on their shoulders and their pipes in their mouths. They were in their shirt-sleeves, and there was much display of belt and of unbuttoned neck. Their helmets were apt to be stuck on their heads in informal attitudes. They were inexpressibly untidy, and they made in their march a loose, shambling suggestion of a procession.
>
> There was only one man who kept in his conduct a sense of decorum, yet I cannot recall it with any fondness. He wore his uniform precisely about him, and though perspiration assailed his face as he worked on his maudlin task not a drop of it ever touched his jacket. He would gaze at me levelly when I watched him work. I fancied the flies flew thicker over whatever grave he worked upon.

> I asked the corporal for his name, and was told that that was Private Amherst. Fitting enough, I remarked, that he should be named for a dealer in smallpox, when he himself seemed almost taken by fever. I regretted my remark the following day, as he stood in his open grave, saluted me, and died on the spot of typhoid."

Weird, right? That's not in the original. Well, the first bit is, I think, but the bit about the guy dying of fever while digging a grave, definitely not. So I reckon it must be a version with all the bits they cut out for publishing in the book or the BMJ. Still, not specifically supernatural, right?

Well, later in the book there's Chapter Nineteen, "The Story of the Restless Man". In the version I read before, it's a nice little story about a soldier with a wounded leg who's given a bed, but keeps giving up his bed for other soldiers he reckons need it more. But it keeps damaging his leg more, and in the end they have to fully order him to stay in the bed. It's meant to illustrate the unselfishness of a soldier to his comrades.

Well, in this weird edition, it goes a bit differently.

> "Among the wounded who came down from Spion Kop was a private whom I recognised, though I scarce can bring myself to believe it. Private Amherst, who was two months buried in the grave he himself had dug, was carried in on a stretcher.

The thigh-bone was broken, and the fracture had been much disturbed by the journey to the hospital. He did not respond to my questions about his supposed death, save a sly smile, and he was given a bedstead in one of the marquees. The limb was adjusted temporarily, and he was told to keep very quiet and not to move off his back.

Next morning, however, he was found lying upon his face, with his limb out of position and his splints, as he said, staring me again in the eye, ‘all anyhow.’ I asked him why he had moved. He told me, with flies buzzing around his fevered head, ‘You see, doctor, I am such a restless man.’

The limb was more elaborately adjusted and everything was left in excellent position. Next morning, however, the restless man was found lying upon the floor of the marquee, and in his bed was a man who had been shot through the chest. The marquee was crowded and the number of beds were few; those who could not be accommodated on beds had to lie on stretchers on the ground. The man who was shot in the chest had come in during the night, and had been placed on the only available stretcher.

Amherst proceeded to tell me that he was happy to share what little he had with those in need. I… I

> will grant I was uncertain of how to proceed, when the man who was shot in the chest died unexpectedly, his wound turning septic with great rapidity, and in due course the restless man was back in his own bed once more.
>
> It was not, however, for long, for on another morning visit Amherst was found on the floor again, and again beamed forth an explanation that one of the wounded on the ground, who had come in late, seemed to be very bad and so he had changed over. The present occupant also died of an infected wound within hours of my noticing.
>
> I was deeply shaken by this odd harbinger of sickness and fatality, but could think of no immediate redress for the matter. However, the moving of a man with a broken thigh from bed to ground and back again means not only such disordering of splints and bandages, but no little danger to the damaged limb. So I felt almost a relief when the wound turned gangrenous with such alarming speed that amputation was simply impossible. As he passed away, the second time, I implored him to stay that way. He just looked at me: 'But you see, doctor, I am such a restless man.'"

Pretty spooky, right? You can see why I wanted to bring this to you guys. I mean, I know it's not exactly having my own statement, my

own brush with the darkness that lurks behind the shadowy veil and preys on the unwary mankind, but it's the next best thing, right?

I'll be honest, I didn't really read it fully before bringing it over here, I thought you're probably in a better position to do that, with your researchers and that, but there was one other bit I wrote out. It was in a worse state than the others, but it was the final chapter, Chapter Thirty. In the original, it recounts the rather miserable death of a soldier as contrasted with battlefield heroics, and is titled "Sic Transit Gloria Mundi". In this version, it doesn't have a title, and it goes like this:

> "I remember at Chieveley one morning before breakfast, watching a solitary man approach the hospital lines. I knew it was him long before my vision became clear. He was now staggering towards the hospital, a ragged, broken-down, khaki-coloured spectre of a man. He dragged his rifle along with him, his belt was gone, his helmet was poised at the back of his head, his tunic was thrown over his shoulders; he was literally black with flies.
>
> He told me he had come from the concentration camps, that there were many among the Boers that shared his state, and that he longed to touch me with all that we had visited upon them. He talked of disease, putrefaction and the writhing creatures

> of filth. He breathlessly talked of his revelation. Then he died, as did the man who came to bury him."

So yeah, I reckoned it might be right up your street.

Consider the book a donation. It's not quite as cool as having a real close encounter of my own but it's the next best thing. Be careful carrying it, though, those old pages are kind of sharp.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Mr. Russo was found dead in his home on June 5th 2003, two days after his statement. Cause of death was found to be blood poisoning from a wound in his hand. Given that the medical records Sasha dug up seem to indicate the putrefaction was far more advanced than the timeframe would reasonably allow, I have a suspicion that Mr. Russo may have gotten a far closer encounter than he realised with a very dangerous book.

A Leitner, I would guess, though some slight charring around the edges of this statement leads me to believe that Gertrude may have made a somewhat unilateral decision about disposing of it, rather than committing it to storage.

Beyond that, all the details seem more or less accurate. Sir Frederick Treeves did indeed work in a field hospital during the Second Boer War, and did write a book about it titled *The Tale of a*

Field Hospital, published in 1900. Tim hunted down an online version of the text, and it certainly doesn't match up with what Mr. Russo reproduced here.

Interestingly, the official text makes no mention whatsoever of the concentration camps used to imprison Boer civilians during the conflict, where sickness and hunger killed tens of thousands and, indeed, it is perfectly possible it was not part of the war Treeves encountered or engaged with. Odd, then, that whatever thing it was that haunted him would choose that as its final message.

Amherst is rapidly becoming one of an uncomfortably long list of names that I dread seeing in a statement. Could this be an ancestor of John Amherst? Or, given the many apparent deaths of the soldier in the book, might it be the same being, well over a hundred years old? If so, I wonder how many times it has died of sickness and disease.

Another point is a link that Treeves brings up which I had not considered, that of Jeffrey Amherst, an 18th century baronet who is most remembered for deliberately providing blankets infected with smallpox to Native American tribes during the so-called French and Indian Wars, leading to a devastating epidemic. A connection to a very different sort of monster, but still one that has the trappings of disease.

I had assumed that Amherst was something similar to Prentiss in his connection to insects, but that may not be all. Insects and disease. No clear connection, other than the fact that they somehow feel

similar. They both make one feel distinctly unclean.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

I'm in the tunnels. I was exploring and I got lost. I haven't gone down any of the stairs and I – I think I'm still under the Institute. There were a couple of spiders, so I changed routes and found, I think it's a gas main. Must be for the whole building. But there's someone coming and I – I don't know who else would be down here, except… I mean, whatever's down here. It was… it was just checking on the upper levels, I didn't prepare for –

NOT!SASHA

John?

[ARCHIVIST CRIES OUT, STARTLED]

John, is that you?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, Sasha, thank god. I thought you – I thought you were a… I don't know. What are you doing down here?

NOT!SASHA

Forgot my coat. I noticed the trap door was open and wanted to make sure you were ok. Did Elias give you the key?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, he… he thought it might help put a stop to some of my "wilder imaginings". Are you okay?

NOT!SASHA

Yes, I'm okay… I don't really like it down here. Hard to focus.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Sasha managed to successfully navigate us out of the tunnels. Might defer future exploration for a while, at least until my heart rate settles down sometime in about a year. The place plays odd tricks with your mind. When I saw Sasha down there, for a moment it was like I didn't recognise her. She seemed… far too tall somehow. I've locked it back up for now. I think I need some fresh air.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG069 – Thought for the Day

Statement #0101811

[CLICK]

MARTIN

Here you go. Sasha in today?

ARCHIVIST

Oh… she's got the day off. Said she was spending the day with this Tom of hers.

MARTIN

Anything nice?

ARCHIVIST

Didn't say.

MARTIN

Have you ever actually met him?

ARCHIVIST

Why would I have? We're don't exactly hold socials. He sounds nice

enough, I suppose. In a Kensington sort of way. You ever met him?

MARTIN

No but she's pretty private with that stuff. Not like Tim.

ARCHIVIST

Hm.

MARTIN

Just talk to him, please.

ARCHIVIST

I think we've said more than enough. I doubt there's much more words can do for us.

MARTIN

You can't work together like this.

ARCHIVIST

Ironically, I think working is all Tim and I can do together.

MARTIN

Look. John… when was the last time we all just talked? Just talked, without all of this –

ARCHIVIST

Thank you for the tea, Martin.

MARTIN

Okay. Fine.

[DOOR OPENS]

He's not wrong, you know.

[DOOR CLOSES]

ARCHIVIST

I know.

Statement of Darren Harlow… *[SIGH]*

Statement of Darren Harlow regarding a failed psychology experiment at the University of Surrey. Original statement given 18th November, 2010. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Things always seem so obvious in retrospect. That experiment was always a terrible idea. Even at the time, I remember thinking it sounded like something out of a horror movie. I mean, every time I heard a new detail about it I'd go home and tell my wife and we'd

speculate over dinner about how it was going to go wrong in some grotesque and horrific way. We'd laugh and suggest the ways it could turn those poor grad students into crazed killers or mutated monsters.

And when I started to see more and more spiders around the lab, I turned the very real sense of unease into the… the fun sort of fear, like I was just playing at being scared. It's so strange, even when you're really looking for horror, it's impossible to actually believe it. It always feels like something you made up. Just having a bit of fun scaring yourself. Because those things don't happen. Not in the real world.

But you think sometimes about what the real world is. Just what your brain mixes together from what your senses tell you. We create the world in a lot of ways. I suppose it shouldn't be surprising that, when we're not being careful, we can change it.

Before you ask any in-depth questions about the methodologies or structure of the experiment, I should make it clear – I'm just one of the cleaners. I have no idea how or why they started it or, god knows, where the funding came from. I find it hard to believe the Psych Department okayed it, but I'm not an academic, and those decisions are way over my head.

I mainly take care of the science labs. Most of the cleaning crews at the university get shifted around a lot, working in different buildings or departments one month to the next, but there's a lot of stuff in the labs that requires additional training to clean safely, so

we're a bit more specialised than the rest. I mean, they still didn't let us within spitting distance of the really expensive equipment; that was all taken care of by the lab techs, but the point is, I'm a much more familiar face around the science departments than a cleaner would otherwise be.

There's also the fact that the science lot actually talked to me on occasion. I don't want to say it's 'cause I'm white and the rest of the cleaning crew isn't, but they always talked to me in a way they didn't talk to the others, so I became the de facto point of contact between the cleaners and the rest of the staff. Long story short, I generally knew roughly what the deal was with most of the experiments being run at any point.

So when Dr. Elizabeth Bates told me about the latest study by her psychology postgrads, I thought she was pulling my leg. The Psych Department is generally one of the least demanding from my perspective as it's almost entirely people sitting at computers or in interview rooms. Once or twice I think they were given use of an MRI machine at some hospital or other, but that's more a neuroscience thing and, more importantly, didn't happen in the buildings I cleaned.

Since I've been there, which is a good seven years now, they've never crossed over into parapsychology, nothing even remotely less than respectable research, so when Liz explained the experiment, and I realised they were basically doing ESP research, I got a bit excited. I mean, she dressed it up with all sorts of science jargon and sent my head spinning plenty, but it still basically boiled down

to seeing if the thoughts and feelings of a group of people in one room had any effect on the experience of a subject in a separate, sealed room. I mean she could talk about “group dynamics” and call it “proximity intuition” or whatever it was she said, but I know ESP research when I’m mopping its floors.

Not that I minded, of course; I love that crap. I’m a horror nut but I generally tend toward the more sci-fi end. Demons and ghosts have never really got me but give me aliens or the sinister powers of the human mind and I am there.

I didn’t tell any of this to Liz, of course, I got the impression that it was a bit of a sore spot, and I’ve no reason to piss off the people I work with. But you can be damn sure I was keeping a much closer eye on this experiment than I was the others. Especially when she told me a bit more about how they were doing it.

The basic premise was pretty similar to most of these studies. There was a room with a one-way mirror where the subject would sit, and they’d be strapped up to measure physical responses. The other side of the glass was anywhere between one and twenty participants, who would be receiving stimulus for a certain response or feeling. Those feelings would be incited while their attention was on the subject through the mirror.

Then they simply measured what, if any, response the subject had to something they couldn’t see, hear or otherwise be aware of. Sometimes the subject was told there were people on the other side of the glass when there weren’t, in order to get a control group and

weed out any placebo responses. The subject's name was Annabelle Cane.

What really got me, though, was what Liz told me about the specific nature of the feelings they were trying to project. They were planning to work with fear. Specifically, they had selected as projectors a group of people who self-identified as arachnophobes, and at certain points of their watching Annabelle, videos of spiders crawling, eating and spawning would be randomly projected over the glass, inciting an acute fear response.

The reasoning was that fear was both an extremely powerful emotion and one that would be quite easy to distinguish in Annabelle's responses. They wanted to see if they could use ESP to scare her.

I told you it sounded like a set-up to a horror movie, right? I don't know how they didn't see that. I mean, maybe they did. Maybe they went ahead with it for the same reason I joked with Laura about it instead of requesting a transfer. You come to relish the ghoulishness of it, because deep down you know it's safe. The worst that might happen would a few upset students. It should have just been an idle flight of fancy.

Now, I can't really speak to what happened for the majority of the study. For obvious reasons, I wasn't cleaning the rooms in question while they were doing the tests, but heard a few bits and pieces about it from Liz and some of the other researchers. It seemed to be going well to begin with. Annabelle was displaying some subtle but

statistically significant signs of distress and unease while the spiders were being shown. Signs that were noticeably absent during the control periods.

I know that the fear reactions were certainly serious enough for the poor souls that had unwittingly signed up as projectors: I had to clean up when one of them was sick during the first round of testing. He had to leave the experiment, if I remember. Lucky sod.

I'm sure you can guess what I ended up cleaning more and more of over the course of the study. Cobwebs. I mean, you can't avoid them in buildings with high ceilings and inviting corners, but even so, there were more and more of them each day. I'd brush or hoover them away in an evening only to find them returned the next morning, thicker than ever.

I never got a good look at the spiders behind them. Unlike most of the ones I've seen, sitting fat and proud in the centre of their web, the most I ever saw of these ones would be a quick scuttle of dark legs disappearing into a hole in the plaster or behind a wall installation.

It creeped me out plenty, but in a good way, I thought. I knew that, logically, they were just escaping the winter. I mean, you know how cold it's been these last few weeks. I'd try to spook Liz, telling her how her dark experiments were summoning up an army of spiders. I had no idea.

The tests were progressing, and they had started introducing

multiple projectors at once to see how it affected the intensity of the feelings Annabelle was receiving. Liz was very excited by the results. I can still remember her face as she told me that Annabelle had apparently reported having several unsettling dreams about spiders.

Notably, at no point in the experiment had she been informed that it was spiders being used. Liz was excited, telling me how the dreams seemed to map very well to the physiological responses they had been recording; how Annabelle had dreamed of “tiny legs running along her veins like a web”.

It was then they started to have problems, though. While adding additional projectors had at first increased the severity of the responses, it seemed this had very quickly tapered off, and soon the measurements had changed significantly. They were still getting noticeable responses, but they weren’t like the ones they had gotten before. They didn’t appear to be fear.

Liz was irritated by this as. Even though the results still looked good for a general ESP study, the variation in response tone would apparently muddy the research in ways she wasn’t keen on.

I only saw Annabelle Cane once during this period. She wasn’t hard to pick out. She dressed like a vintage clothing store exploded on her, and her short bleach-blonde hair stood out sharply against dark skin. The first time I saw her I’d liked her. She looked like the kind of student who occasionally talked to cleaners like we were people. Not that we ever actually spoke, but she had that air about her.

This time, though, it was just as she was leaving the mirror room. She was walking strangely, like her trousers didn't fit her right. She kept bending her knees at kind of odd angles, holding herself with this stiffness. Her arm was extended, and she ran her hand along the wall as she went, moving her fingers rapidly so it scuttled like… well, like a spider with its legs missing.

Even then I didn't really start to consider what might be happening. No, I didn't take it seriously until what happened last Thursday. I'd pulled a late shift and had just finished my first sweep of the labs. I'd made a start on mopping the corridors leading up to the rooms Liz had been using, when I noticed the lights were still on. Now, she'd mentioned that that afternoon they were trying the first sessions with all nineteen of the remaining projectors – they'd had a predictably high dropout rate.

Now, I know that the more people you have involved in a test, the longer it tends to take and the more potential there is for delays, so it might well have overrun, but it was half nine in the evening by that point, so it seemed very unlikely it would have gone on that long. I thought maybe they'd just left the lights on by accident. These things happen. I did my best to forget that the lights in those rooms were normally motion activated.

I hope someday I'll forget what I saw when I opened that door, but I won't. All the arachnophobes, Liz's "projectors", were stood in two circles, the one inside of the other. Their hands and arms were locked together in a complex, interlocking pattern and they walked around, rotating the whole thing slowly but surely.

Liz wasn't there, but in the corner I could see one of her postgrad students, I think his was Mark, standing there, staring like he was in some sort of trance. I mean, they all looked like they were in a trance.

The other side of the glass, I could see Annabelle Cane stood there, staring at them. Her body was hunched over and contorted in a way that was definitely not natural, and I really want it to have been a trick of the light, but for a second it looked like she had more than two eyes.

Almost as soon as I opened the room, the movement of the circle stopped abruptly and their heads snapped to face me all at once. I froze in panic. They dropped their arms to the side, and for a moment I was sure they were going to attack me, but instead they turned back towards the window, towards Annabelle, and walked up to it, lining close in front of the glass.

With a sudden, jerky motion, they drew their heads back, then slammed them into the mirrored window, shattering it all at once. I wanted to run, but I couldn't will my body to move. I just stood there, watching the blood run down from the cuts in their foreheads, as Annabelle began to climb through the broken window, her limbs moving and reaching, slowly and deliberately. The others didn't move a muscle as she crawled over them, then over the floor towards me.

When she was about a foot away from me, she drew herself up to her full height. I don't know exactly how tall she had been before,

but now she loomed over me by almost a full foot. Her eyes locked on mine, and I began to feel something. It was like a hundred tiny, scurrying legs inside my skull, moving and scampering through my mind.

I felt my hands, which had dropped to the side of my body, begin to raise. They gripped my legs and then, apparently of their own accord, they began to crawl up me, climbing slowly over my stomach, my chest, my shoulders, until, finally, they came to rest upon my throat. I've never been a strong man but that didn't seem to matter as my own fingers began to close around my neck like a vice.

Panic was making me breathe fast and shallow, but within seconds I couldn't even do that. I don't know if you've ever been strangled, but it takes a lot longer than you think it does. I've no idea exactly how long it was before the edges of my vision began to go dark, but it felt like forever.

Then, out of the corner of my eye I saw Mark, the researcher, move. I don't know how he'd broken whatever spell Annabelle had put him under but he'd apparently managed to. With a sudden, unexpected motion, he charged at her and slammed his full weight into her side.

The attack took her completely off guard and she fell hard against the edge of the broken window, the side of her head making a god awful crunching sound as it hit. All at once the others collapsed onto the floor, like their strings had been cut. My hands dropped as

well, and I took a long, painful gasp of air.

I collapsed, taking a few moments to try and regain myself. Mark already had his phone out and was trying to call the police. I was groggy and my brain felt like someone had taken a belt-sander to it, but I managed to struggle to my feet. I looked at the crumpled form of Annabelle Cane just as it started to get back up. I could see the side of her skull had been caved in, and beneath the wet mess of blood and bone, I saw a mass of dull white cobweb.

I ran. I'm not proud of it. I ran out of that building, back to my car and I just drove away. I drove for almost an hour before I finally pulled into a side road and started crying. I never saw any of them again.

The University administration contacted me before the police did. They told me in no uncertain terms that if I valued my job, I had officially not been in the building that night. I didn't really know what I'd have told the cops anyway, and I needed that job, so when I was questioned I told them I'd been home sick with a stomach bug. I think the fact that I looked like death helped convince them, and I wore a high-necked shirt to the interview.

Official line was that Annabelle had suffered a psychotic break and broken the window, injuring a lot of people with broken glass before beating Mark half to death and fleeing the building. The others in that room don't seem to remember anything, and I don't know if Mark ever mentioned me in his testimony. He and Liz still haven't returned to the University, and I've not made any efforts to

contact them.

As far as I know, Annabelle Cane is still out there. I'm keeping my distance from anything even remotely spider-related, though. I somehow managed to live through one horror movie. I have no intention of going looking for another.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

More spiders. Mr. Harlow's testimony does at least have the decency to be widely corroborated. The story of the psychology student who went mad during an ESP study is still widely discussed in certain quarters of Surrey University, and there are multiple newspaper articles covering the events in depth, though none of them mention the, uh, arachnid angle, or indeed Mr. Harlow's involvement.

Both Mark Voight and Dr. Elizabeth Bates left the University almost immediately following the incident under something of a cloud. Dr. Bates has refused our request for an interview point-blank, while Martin informs me that Mr. Voight's testimony was disjointed and borderline incomprehensible. Apparently, biologically, his account of the spiders doesn't make any sense according to Martin. Also, apparently, he cried a lot. He did, however, at least confirm the presence of Mr. Harlow at the event, and the rest of the conversation was a mess of rambling about legs and scuttling.

Despite his recent issues, Tim came through on this one. Police

reports do support the official story of a student who suffered a violent episode and attacked other people involved in a research study. It was ascribed to a psychotic attack, though Annabelle Cane's parents have repeatedly stated she had no history of mental illness or violence. Indeed, I've rarely seen so blatant a use of the image of a frothing lunatic outside the pages of lurid fiction. I do not think she went mad.

Annabelle Cane has never been apprehended and appears to all intents and purposes to have disappeared. What is equally, if not more concerning, is that in the years since that statement, every one of the other participants in that study, Dr. Bates' so-called "projectors", have also disappeared. I cannot help but wonder how many cobwebs might be found in their old homes.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

I, uh, I've not been back in the tunnels. I find myself… let's call it what it is – I'm scared. Especially after last week's abortive exploration.

And yet, every other lead seems to have dried up or given more questions without resolving anything, and short of confronting Elias with what I've found, or waiting in the unlikely hope of more tapes from Basira, I am struggling to settle on any plan that doesn't take me down into those tunnels. Down to find something that has made very clear that it does not want to be found.

I should ask the others for help but I… I can't. At best, they'd just try to talk me out of it. At worst… No, I… if I'm going down there, I go alone.

I should just leave it. They're right. But I can't not know.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG070 – Book of the Dead

Statement #0030912

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Masato Murray, regarding an unusual inheritance and the causes thereof. Original Statement given 9th December, 2003. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I did wonder why he left me anything in the first place. Philip Doah and I always kind of hated each other. You know those friends you have who aren't really your friends, but you go to the same parties and it's not enough of a thing that you'd actually avoid each other, so everyone just assumes you're friends, and you kind of absorb that and even start picturing them there when you think about "your friends" as a group, but deep down you both know you don't actually like each other, it's just that it's actually more effort to not be friends? Well, Phil was one of those.

He was fine if you were discussing a movie and he was picking apart the dialogue or the casting choices, but whenever he started drinking, he got political, and let's just say he was the sort of guy

who thought that minimum wage was a bad idea. I don't have particularly strong opinions myself, but it really wasn't a rant you want to hear when you're four beers in. Especially when you've heard it plenty already. It was like, yeah Phil, we know you got where you are through sheer hard work and determination, and the fact your parents gave you their second house as a 21st birthday present didn't help at all. Asshole. Not that I want to speak ill of the dead.

Anyway, as far as I knew, my distaste for him was always mutual, so it came as a real surprise to learn he'd left me something in his will. I'd love to make some flippant remark and say the only gift I needed was him falling under that train, but truth be told his death actually hit me pretty hard. All of us felt it. I mean, 37 years old. It's an odd time to go. It's not really in the realms of "tragic loss of a young life so full of potential", but it's still a long way from "I guess it was his time".

I guess it just hit all of us that we were entering the period of our lives where sometimes people die. Life was no longer a given, and it wouldn't actually be as long as all that before funerals were starting to outnumber the weddings. This was back in February, and I'd just turned 34, but it played on my mind. Mortality.

I just kept thinking to myself: the moment I die will feel just the same as this one. It's not a thing forever in the future; I will be in that present just as surely as I am in this one. And I will end. I've never been a religious man, and I always say I take comfort in the idea of a peaceful oblivion but that's a lie. I'm terrified.

The inheritance I received from Phil didn't exactly do anything to calm my mind. It was listed in the inventory as his journal, but looking at it that didn't seem right at all. It was clearly older than 37 years, with the black bookcloth faded and worn away at the corners. For a second I wondered if maybe it was some sort of family journal, passed down between generations, but then leaving it to me made even less sense.

I still took it. I mean, what else are you going to do in a situation like that? It was larger than it had looked lying on the table, and heavier, like one of those old family bibles you sometimes see in museums. I did have the decency to wait until the end of proceedings before I carried it home and started to look on the Internet to try and see how much it might be worth.

This was actually the first time I took a proper look at it. I don't know, really, the whole thing felt so surreal that actually examining the thing hadn't quite felt right when they first gave it to me. There wasn't any obvious name on the cover, and I wondered if it might have had a dust wrapper that had been lost, but it seemed far too large for anything like that to fit. Opening it up at the beginning, it seemed to lack a proper title page as well, or any other form of identification. Instead, printed there was a quote, though there wasn't any attribution for it. It read:

> "Life is a current which cannot be fought. It is a march with one destination. You cannot cease your step, nor move your course, to one that skirts the journey's termination."

And below it, in a faded blue ink was a handwritten message:

"YOU HAVE ALREADY READ TOO MUCH"

I laughed at this. I was starting to think that maybe Phil was finding one final way to be an asshole from beyond the grave. I'd never thought he'd actually had much imagination, but a gruesome practical joke did seem the most likely explanation at that point. So I turned the page to see what was next.

The next page was in Latin, but not printed Latin. It looked handmade, like those old medieval books that monks used to write out. The ornate Gothic script cascaded down the page, rigid and sharp. Obviously I couldn't read it. Even if I had the first clue about Latin, which I do not, I could barely make out which letter was which. The next page was similar, and the one after that. It was almost twenty pages before the writing became something close to what I recognised.

It was English, but not like modern English. I'm not sure if it was Old- or Middle- or whatever, but they tried to make me study *The Canterbury Tales* once for English class, and it looked kind of like that. Close enough to real words that you knew it was the same language, but it was spelt all wrong and didn't actually make much sense when you tried to read it.

There were a couple of words that stuck out, though. It seemed to be about someone called Julian, and "Deeth" cropped up a few times, which I assumed was "Death" and even one instance of the

word “Homycide”, which I didn’t even know was a word back then.

The next pages were more of the same, though I did gradually get more and more so I could understand it, each was in a very different hand, until it reached the entry on Christopher. This was one of the first with printed type, and like the others, had no real heading or formatting, just a solid block of text that covered the page. It was an account of the death of somebody named Christopher, which apparently took place in the Year of our Lord Fifteen Ninety-Two. He was dragged through the streets of Norwich by a horse, scraping off a good deal of skin on the jagged, frozen ground. After about ten minutes of leaving this bloody trail, the horse proceeds to stop, turn around and slam its hooves into his head until it caves in. Christopher does not lose consciousness until the third impact. This whole scenario was described in vivid, graphic detail. I felt a bit unwell, reading the account of how it felt for him to hear his own skull breaking.

It soon became clear that all the accounts were similar. Each detailed a death, often violent, always unpleasant. They were in chronological order, with what looked like five to ten years between each one, though sometimes they came much quicker, one after the other. I also started to notice, on some of the pages, a faint scorching around the edges, though it would be some time before my own attempts to burn it proved how resilient it really was.

As it went through the ages, the style and the manners of death updated with it, though no-one found in those pages seemed to die naturally. I wasn’t reading them very closely at that point, one

gruesome death being very much like another, when I reached the last two pages before the book's contents became blank. The penultimate was for Philip Doah, and the last one, as I'm sure you might have guessed, was for me.

It was hard, reading the book's description of Phil's death. It lingered on his terror as he felt himself falling off the platform, the screech of the train's wheels as they rumbled unstoppably towards him. It said that though his legs were severed and his body crushed, it had taken him almost two minutes to die as he watched his blood flowing out along the rails.

I couldn't believe what I was reading. It was sick. Could someone have put this in the book after his death? Why would they do something like that? Or could it be that Phil's accident had been more deliberate than everyone thought? Maybe it was suicide? But even then, I mean, I respect anyone's right to end their own life, but even if that was the case, writing gory fiction about it beforehand is well beyond anything that Phil was capable of.

I didn't know what to do. Should I tell someone? And tell them what? The book was old, and these pages look newer than the old handwritten bits, sure, but they still did look like part of the book. If this was some elaborate hoax or morbid joke, whoever did it had a whole book deliberately written, printed and very convincingly aged, just to play it on me, whose only significance was that I kind of didn't like a man who died. None of it made any sense.

Finally, I turned to the last page before they turned blank. It was

my death. It was to occur, so it said, in 2014. Eleven years in the future. I was apparently to be walking along an isolated country road in Lancashire, of all places, when a passing car would lose control and run me down. The impact would drive me into the wooded barrier, impaling me on a fallen tree branch. The driver was killed in the crash, and no-one else would pass by as I lay there, alone and screaming for help, until my body finally gave up. It was quite particular about how the jagged wood was going to feel as it passed through my torso.

I closed the book and tried to understand what I had just read. It was a joke. It had to be. A sick prank by someone who had clearly hated me far more than I had expected. Phil had decided to kill himself, and had this made to harass me afterwards. It was the only explanation that made any sense. Besides, even if it was somehow true and this thing could genuinely tell the future, my end was still well over a decade away. Too far to be of any immediate worry. I simply wouldn't go to Lancashire. Maybe ever. Certainly not in 2014. I had no idea what would even cause me to go there in the first place. So I did my best to ignore it. For a while.

It played on my mind, though. I mean, how could it not? So I started to look into some of the other deaths it detailed. Not obsessively, at least not at that point, but I took the time to search online for a few of the names and how they died. It wasn't easy, as the book only ever gave first names, and most of them pre-dated online records by a long time. Eventually, though, I found one. Alexander, so the book claimed, had died in 1983, after his home

was broken into. He was stabbed seven times in his bed before his throat was sliced open. The entry went so far as to assure me that the murderer was never identified or caught.

Well, after a little bit of digging, I found him. Alexander Willard. It was an article on the history of the small town of Alcester, near Stratford-upon-Avon. It was focused on the darker aspects of the area's history, and detailed the few ghosts that supposedly haunted the area. Tucked at the end of the piece was the mention of a strange unsolved murder that had taken place in 1983, where a local mechanic named Alexander Willard had been killed in his bed. No culprit was ever found, and no motive for the crime was ever determined.

Of course, that didn't prove anything. Not really. Only that whoever had written the book had really done their research. There was nothing to it but a lot of time and energy that had, for some reason, gone towards the sole purpose of scaring me. If it was true, if it was real, and Phil had it in his possession, surely he could have read of his own demise and taken steps to avoid it. I turned back to the page for my own death, the sickening desire to re-read the details gnawing at me. And that was when everything I thought I knew crumbled. Because the page had changed.

The words were as solid and unmoving as they always had been, but now it told me that I died in London. In 2012. I was apparently renting a flat in Bethnal Green with a faulty gas main. The gas had built up undetected, and when I tried to light the oven to cook a piece of salmon, it exploded and set the whole place alight. I was to

be admitted to the Royal London Hospital Emergency Department with third degree burns over seventy percent of my body, where I died nineteen hours later.

My whole body was shaking at this point. I threw the book across the room and left. I walked for hours, no idea in which direction. It wasn't possible. I was losing it. It was the only explanation. But I knew that I was as sane as I ever had been. When did it change? Was it when I turned back to read it again? Or perhaps when I had made the decision to never visit Lancashire? If the book knew the future, then how much did it know me? My decisions and choices were my own, so was it responding to them or simply to the fact that I opened the book again? Perhaps it changed every time I opened it, even if I didn't read the page, every interaction changing my fate, though none, it seemed, made it less horrible.

I went to stay with a friend of mine, John Kendrick, for a few days. He could see something was wrong, and thankfully didn't ask me about it, instead just trying to cheer me up. I tried to forget it, to ignore what I had read but it's not the sort of thing that ever truly leaves your mind, and eventually I found myself back in that lonely house, staring at that damned book. Had it changed? Were the words now within that raggedy black covering already describing a new, more painful end for me? Or had it shown mercy, and granted me a quicker death?

I tried to destroy it, of course. It wouldn't burn, and water didn't seem to damage the pages. Spilled ink didn't mark them, and though I considered burying it, I couldn't shake the feeling that

those who came before me must have tried all the same things. I read my death again, as it told me how I was to be partially decapitated by a falling piece of masonry on New Years Eve, 2011.

I try not to read it, of course. But sometimes it just gets too much. Every time the date gets closer, and the manner of my death stays just as awful. When I close the book I wonder, are those same words still there, squatting and biding their time, or have they already changed into some new unknown terror that I can neither know nor avoid, waiting to spring on me.

I haven't brought the book with me to show you, and I am not planning to write up a will. I don't know whether it's ownership of the thing that makes it write your fate or just reading it. Either way, I will keep it as long as it will let me. Until I reach an end that may be more gruesome, but is fundamentally no different than that which awaits us all.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Mr. Murray disappeared shortly after making this statement. As far as we can determine, it was a voluntary disappearance, as the lease on his flat was cancelled shortly beforehand, and he resigned from his post as an administrator with Birmingham City Council. Since then, he has apparently been successful in changing or hiding his identity, and neither Sasha nor Tim have had any luck locating him, though Tim was able to confirm that one Philip Doah passed away

after falling under a train at Birmingham New Street Station on the 1st of August, 2003. There are also no accident reports we were able to find that matched any of his supposed predicted deaths.

I've discouraged further attempts to locate Mr. Murray, as even the latest of his possible ends was some years ago now, and if he was in any way correct about the book, he is most likely long dead.

Notable in his account, however, is the absence of any indication that this book was ever possessed by Jurgen Leitner. It seems to support the theory that, whatever these books are, Leitner is not entirely responsible for them.

One other slightly encouraging piece of news is apparently IT have finally figured out what's wrong with Sasha's computer – it's been getting authentication errors when attempting to connect with external devices or networks. I can't say I'm fully familiar with exactly what that means, but hopefully now the problem has been isolated, they can come up with some sort of workaround, and future investigations will be able to once again fully utilise her technical skills.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

Books. Again and again it always seems to come back to those books. There are other artefacts that hold sinister power, certainly, but none of them seem to be quite so prevalent or insidious as those damn books. But why? I had always assumed that Leitner had created them somehow, leasing parts of his own damned soul give them power, or some similar nonsense. But no. I've heard enough now to be sure that these books existed long before he managed to hunt them down. Not all of them, though, it would seem.

I found something in the tunnels. I have now thoroughly explored the upper level, at least as far as I'm able. Further in, some of the passageways are blocked off or ruined by infrastructure works. Pipes and drainage, that sort of thing. It may be that the lower levels would have a route underneath and back up the other side, though I've yet to make much headway down there.

But, shortly after I started exploring the second level, I found something. It was a room, empty except for three wooden chairs. It looked like there had previously been more, but they had been smashed. Based on the scorch marks in the corner, I think I know what they were used for. The ashes were old, impossible to tell what they might have been before they were burned, except for the small scraps of old paper dotted around the floor. I think someone tore up a book and then burned it.

There was only one scrap large enough to decipher anything legible: “They have for adversaries the *Satariel*, or concealers, the Demons of absurdity, of intellectual inertia, and of Mystery.”

That answers the question of what happened to the copy of *The Key of Solomon* that Gertrude bought. But if she only bought it to destroy it, why down there? There seemed no especial significance to the room, except that it contained some old wooden furniture. No sign of the other Leitners, though. I’ll need to keep looking.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG071 – Underground

Statement #0172501

[CLICK]

KAROLINA

Okay?

ARCHIVIST

One second. Statement of Karolina Górka, regarding a brief period trapped on the London Underground. Statement taken direct from subject 25th January, 2017.

KAROLINA

Thank you. On the night of the 6th of January, 2017, I left the Star of Kings and walked down to the tube station at King's Cross Saint Pancras. For reasons I'm not interested in discussing here, I have for some years now maintained a tradition of celebrating a personal New Year's Eve with a handful of close friends, a week or so after the actual event. The last two of these celebrations have taken place at the Star, a pub which I have grown fond of for its choice of beer and the open fireplaces that it keeps lit during the winter. I find it a very comforting place.

It was exactly one in the morning when I left, as that was when the

pub closed on a Friday, and the only guests still remaining were a colleague of mine named Andrew Barnet, my friend Leanne Hilliard and her husband Mark. All of them will confirm my presence and the time of my leaving. I had originally planned to go home shortly after midnight, and my housemate, Tamara Simpkin, had gone back at that time, but I had been in a rather heated discussion with Andrew, and had stayed until last orders. On my way to the station, I stopped into Crystal Kebab and bought a box of chips which I ate there. I ate slowly, as the wind had picked up and I was not keen to go back out into the cold.

By the time I arrived at the station, I had missed what would have previously been the last Tube. It was with some relief that I realised the Victoria line, which would take me up to my home near Seven Sisters, had recently started running an all-night service on Fridays and Saturdays. I was somewhat reluctant to share my ride home with a carriage full of drunks, but that was always the danger of drinking on a Saturday. So I made my way down the escalators and through the tunnels to the northbound Victoria Line platform.

It was deserted; not a single person was there beside myself. Looking down to the other end, I did see another figure, just one, but they were walking away and out into the rest of the station. It was hard to tell from a distance, but I believe he was holding a shovel of some sort. There hadn't been a train for almost ten minutes, but at the time I didn't think much of it.

It was eerie, waiting there, and maybe I should have taken it as a warning sign, but there had been a lot of noise around me all night

and now I was relishing the quiet. I hoped that if the platform was this deserted, maybe the train would be quiet as well. Perhaps I could even get a carriage to myself.

The train pulled up as normal. Maybe the brakes squealed a bit more than they should have, but there was nothing that stood out to me as odd. Looking back, maybe the train car was older than it should have been, or dustier, but I wasn't paying that much attention and I didn't get a good look at it afterwards. So when the doors opened, I stepped inside and took a seat. I turned out I'd been right, there wasn't anybody else in the carriage at all. It was just me.

My phone had died two hours before, so I couldn't listen to my music, and I just sat there in silence as the doors closed and the train began to move forward. At some point the silence stopped being comforting and began to feel as though it were pressing down on me. Even the rumble of the train's movement seemed to be muted, like it was being muffled somehow.

I tried to take my mind off it. I scanned the adverts pasted above the row of chairs opposite me but they were blank. At least, they seemed blank when I first looked at them. Moving a bit closer I could see that there was something behind the clear plastic. It was dirt. It looked as though each of the adverts had been covered in a layer of dry, tight-packed soil. I turned to the ones behind me, above my own chair, and saw the same thing. I reached up to touch one of them, and was greeted with a small shower of grit, but still couldn't see anything behind it.

Now that I was looking for it, I could see that it wasn't only these signs that seemed to be covered in dirt. When I had first got in, I had assumed the carriage was just grimy from a full day of commuters, but everywhere I looked, I saw now that it was a thin dusting of dry earth. It was on the chairs, the floor, even the edge of the windows. Where I had been walking, I could see my footprints clearly on the muddy floor. They were the only pair.

I decided that I was going to get off at the next station. When I reached Highbury and Islington I knew there was a night bus that I could take to get home. It would be slower, but it would get me off this train and that was now making me feel very uncomfortable. So I waited.

I had been travelling for about three minutes at that point and I checked my watch impatiently. Five minutes passed. Eight minutes passed. I was sure we should have arrived at the next station by that point, but the train just kept moving. We hadn't gone through the next station; I was sure I would have seen it through the windows, and it certainly seemed to be going as fast as it normally would. Faster, maybe, I don't really know how to measure something like that.

Ten minutes went by, then fifteen, and there was no sign that the train was stopping, or even approaching another station. It shouldn't have been possible, but it was. I just stood there, trying to keep my balance, not wanting to sit on the seats or hold on to the dusty handrail. The air had become thick, and I could smell the cold damp, like an old basement or a cave.

After almost twenty minutes I walked over and pulled the emergency lever in the hopes that it might have some effect. I had to dig out several handfuls of sticky mud from around the handle before I could even reach it. I gripped it firmly and pulled. It snapped off in my hands and I could see the point where it joined the wall had been eaten away by rust.

That was when I finally decided to sit down and wait it out. Either it would arrive somewhere or it wouldn't, and if I had managed to wander into some grubby ghost train then there wasn't much I was going to be able to do about it. I stopped checking my watch and just sat there.

At some point I felt the train beginning to slow. There was no indication of where we were, and the automatic station announcements were silent. I stayed in my seat. It was one of the few times in my life I have regretted being an atheist, as I think I would have valued having a god to pray to. By the end we were going so slowly that I didn't even notice when we finally stopped for almost twenty seconds. I looked at the doors, but they showed no sign of opening, and the other side was still just the bare wall of the underground tunnel. We were not at a station.

I had already decided that, whatever might be out there, not being in the train was better than staying put, so I did my best to force the doors open. It was surprisingly easy, and once I had gotten them an inch or two apart, something must have tripped and they slid the rest of the way on their own.

The other side was the wall of the tunnel. But rather than the normal cables and construction you would expect from the Underground, this was bare earth. It was slick with damp, and instead of the two-foot gap you would expect to be between the door and the wall, it came right up to the lip of it. There was no clearance at all: the doors seemed to be completely flush with this solid barrier of soil.

As it became clear to me that there was no way I was going to be able to get out of any of the side exits, I was faced, to my mind, with three choices. I could sit there and wait, at the mercy of whatever situation I had found myself in. I could head through the other carriages leading towards the rear of the train and hope I could get off there and walk back along the tunnel. Or I could do the same thing heading towards the front of the train, hoping that there was someone in the driver's compartment that could explain what was going on. I picked the third option. It was, of course, a mistake.

The doors between the carriages were tiny, and each bore several bright warning signs promising death or prosecution if they were used incorrectly. I ignored these and opened the one leading towards the front of the train. The gap between the cars was slick with mud and a thin rain of dirt trickled down from the roof of the tunnel. I opened the next door and stepped inside.

It was even dirtier in this carriage than in the one I had left, with a distinct layer of muddy soil over everything that I could see. The silence had been replaced by a new noise, a sort of creaking groan

that sounded like it was coming from the train itself. It was only later I learned that this is what metal sounds like when under immense strain. I walked briskly through this car, seeing nothing that caught my attention, and opened the next door at the other end, continuing my journey towards the driver.

I hadn't really seen how long the train was when I got in, but I had been in the middle of the platform so I didn't think it could be more than four or five carriages to the front. This door seemed wedged quite firmly shut, and it was only with a great deal of effort that I was able to pull it open. I almost fell into the space between them while trying to force the next one open. I am sure that if I had done so I would be dead.

When I got into this one the first thing I noticed was the ceiling. In certain places it seemed to have buckled slightly with large dents in the material pushing down. Many of the lights and windows were broken and the whole of the carriage seemed to be bent and twisted slightly, like it was being crushed.

The sound of metal fatigue was stronger here, and I realised with a start that this was exactly what was happening. If it got worse the further through I went, there was a good chance the driver, if there was one, had already been crushed, or at the very least trapped beyond my reach. I turned to go back the way I had come, but the door had swung shut, and in the few seconds it had taken me to understand what was happening, the pressure had already warped the frame too much. It was jammed shut, and no amount of kicking was going to move it.

I was becoming desperate, and looked around for anything I could see that might be a way out. What I saw instead, right at the other end, was a person. It was hard to make out any details, as all the lights in that section were already shattered, but they were sat very still. I called out but there was no response. I made my way over to them, though by the time I reached that part of the carriage I was having to bend down to avoid parts of the ceiling.

It appeared to be a man, probably late fifties, early sixties, with a scraggly grey beard and what had once been a nice jacket. He had sunken blue eyes, and the seat around him had twisted so much it was now holding him in place at an angle that looked very painful. The armrests were digging hard into the flesh of his leg, and his back was crooked. Despite this, he seemed to be breathing.

When he didn't respond to my voice, I touched him lightly on the shoulder. His eyes opened slowly, and locked on mine. The look on his face was one of incredible sadness, as though all the fear had been sucked out of him and now all that was left was some unspeakable misery. I asked him if I could help, whether we could get out there, but he just shook his head, his neck making horrid cracking noises as he did so.

I felt his hand close around my wrist, gripping it with an unexpected strength. I tried to push him away but his fingernails dug into my skin, drawing blood. A ragged voice hissed out of him, despairing and full of pain. He said to me, "Not enough space to move. Never enough to breathe." Then he let me go.

By then, the ceiling was almost on top of me and the walls looked like they were close to giving way. I thought about what options I had and, after a few seconds, I lay down on the floor and closed my eyes. Being crushed to death would be horrible, yes, but I have never been afraid of dying, and it didn't appear that there would be any point to further escape attempts. Better to accept my fate and hope it was all some awful dream.

I kept my eyes shut and tried to relax, as the sound of twisting metal filled my ears and I could feel the floor begin to shift beneath me. It bent up, either side, and slowly began to press inwards. Far away, under the smothering blanket of earth, I could hear the old man screaming.

When I awoke, I was on the platform at Walthamstow Central, with one of the station assistants leaning over me, trying to see if I was alright. I was feeling very groggy and I didn't want to be answering questions, so I played drunk, ignored his offers to help and stumbled out into the cold night air. There were a few blissful minutes where I thought it *had* all just been a dream, but then I noticed that I was covered head to toe in mud and dirt. And my wrist ached where five deep red marks made the shape of a clutching hand.

That's it.

ARCHIVIST

Well, that certainly sounds like an… unpleasant experience. I'm not

sure I understand, though. Did you fall asleep, somehow, or…

KAROLINA

I must have done.

ARCHIVIST

That's… that's impressive. Do you still take the Tube?

KAROLINA

Of course. I live in London.

ARCHIVIST

Right. I, uh…

KAROLINA

Is there anything else? I've told you what happened, so I'm done here, correct?

ARCHIVIST

I suppose so, yes. We'll look into it, and if we find anything we'll let you know.

KAROLINA

Don't bother. I'm done with it. Thank you for your time.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Well, that was brusque. Ms. Górka may not be interested in the follow-up, but I am. Since the Night Tube opened there have been a handful of disappearances that occurred where the individuals in question were reported as intending to travel on the late-night London Underground service, mostly on the Victoria and Northern lines. All of them were travelling alone.

The reason none of this has been followed up as related is that CCTV from the appropriate stations does not show the disappeared ever actually arriving. Well, Sasha managed to follow this up, and it would seem that there's no record of Ms. Górka ever entering King's Cross Saint Pancras, even though Martin made contact with Leanne Hilliard and confirmed the rest of her story. TFL have been understandably reluctant to comment.

Interestingly, one of the missing, a man named Nicholas Lekman, has a picture that seems to match the description Ms. Górka gave: age 63, slightly unkempt grey beard, blue eyes. He was last seen heading towards Moorgate station at 2:30 on the morning of Saturday the 17th December 2016, following a fight with his son, who does not believe he ever entered the station. Apparently, Nicholas Lekman hated taking the Underground alone as he was a severe claustrophobe.

I should probably mention this to Sasha. I believe she takes the Victoria line to work and has a tendency to stay later than she should. Aside from that, all that's left to do is sweep up after Ms. Górka. She left the place rather dusty.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

Someone is living down there. In the tunnels. I'm sure of it now. I haven't found any more pages or detritus that might indicate the presence of further books, but the more I explore the lower levels, the more normal rubbish I find. Food wrappers, empty bottles, even a newspaper dated last year. They are normally quite meticulous, it seems, as those things I have found tended to be tucked away in places that might have escaped the notice of someone cleaning up after themselves. But they do miss things.

I find it oddly comforting that who- or whatever is down there needs to eat, as it offers some reassurance that they are at least broadly human. But why? And for how long? And how are they getting their supplies? If Basira was taking my calls I would ask for

some police assistance, in case it's some *(nervous laugh)* unhinged murderer. Especially as there is every likelihood they were the one that killed Gertrude. Assuming it is only one. Yes, on second thoughts, I might well suspend my explorations until I can talk to Basira and get some assistance.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG072 – Takeaway

Statement #0092010

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Could you say that again? I've put you on speaker.

BASIRA (ON SPEAKER)

Maxwell Rayner. Have you heard of him?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Why?

BASIRA (ON SPEAKER)

Who is he?

ARCHIVIST

He was a cult leader back in the Nineties. I don't know about now.

BASIRA (ON SPEAKER)

The Church of the People?

ARCHIVIST

The People's Church of the Divine Host.

BASIRA (ON SPEAKER)

Right.

ARCHIVIST

Is he involved in a case or something?

BASIRA (ON SPEAKER)

We're on our way to arrest him.

(pause)

Hello?

ARCHIVIST

No I'm… Yes, I'm here. You've found him?

BASIRA (ON SPEAKER)

Not me, but I'm one of the ones going in. There's a lot of sectioned guys here, so I thought I'd give you a call. Any advice?

ARCHIVIST

Bring torches.

BASIRA (ON SPEAKER)

Torches?

ARCHIVIST

As many as you can get your hands on. How many do you have?

BASIRA (ON SPEAKER)

Um, there's a firearms team here, so we should have plenty of tactical lights. So you reckon it's going to get dark?

[CALL STARTS DISTORTING AND CRACKLING]

ARCHIVIST

Basira? Hello?

BASIRA (ON SPEAKER)

(Almost too distorted to make out) John? John? Can you hear me?

[PHONE BEEPS AND CUTS OFF]

ARCHIVIST

Oh… damn. Right. *[SIGH]*

Statement of Craig Goodall, regarding his explorations of an abandoned chicken and kebab shop in Walthamstow. Original statement given 20th October 2009. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I feel like I should be upfront with this right at the beginning. I'm probably a cannibal. I don't know for sure, but the likelihood is high. You ever hear of Han Yong? Otherwise known as John Haan? I guess it depends on what corners of the Internet you lurk in or what tabloids you were reading in 2004. If you haven't, let me explain. John Haan ran a small takeaway on Higham Hill Road in Walthamstow.

Weirdly enough, it wasn't a Chinese; it just served kebab, chicken, burgers… the usual. Well, it went out of business in May 2004 when Mr. Haan was arrested for murdering his wife, Lanying. So far, so mundane, right? Except for the fact that over the previous two weeks John Haan had been disposing of the body the way only a takeaway owner can. He went full-on Sweeney Todd.

Now, the thing is, I live just off Higham Hill Road, and I used to go to that takeaway all the time. I definitely went there a few times in May 2004. I haven't been able to find out from any of the news reports exactly what he was selling the meat as, but over the course of the month I definitely had chicken wings, doner kebab, chicken kebab and a burger, so there's a very good chance I ate some of her.

It's weird, though, everything I've found online says that human meat is meant to be very similar to pork, but nothing I was served was like that. I mean, pork is pretty different from beef or lamb or chicken, and I can't see how it was being easily passed off as any of them. But he must have managed it somehow. Maybe the doner? It

was so heavily spiced it would have disguised the flavour, I guess. I don't know how he would have made it look like doner meat, though. It's very distinctive and I was always under the impression that you needed to order those huge rotating columns of things specially.

Regardless, the fact of the matter is that I am almost certainly a cannibal. You know the weirdest part, though? The bit I regret most is that I don't know which of the meals it was. I feel like, if I've been tricked into eating a person, I might at least have learned what a human being tastes like. And I don't really have a problem with the idea, in any sort of moral sense, at least.

I know how that sounds, and I'm certainly not okay with murder, not to mention the issue with prion diseases, but the actual act of eating meat that comes from a human? I'm fine with it. I can't help but feel that anyone happy to eat other meats is something of a hypocrite if they're not at least theoretically fine with eating human. There's nothing inherently special about us. We feel as much pain, see the world with the same eyes as a real pig. Meat is meat. That's what John Haan said when they arrested him. The only thing he said. Meat is meat.

None of this really changes anything. Whether or not I've eaten chicken wing made of person doesn't actually factor into this, I guess, except that it's the reason I always kept an eye on the old takeaway. After John Haan was arrested, it was never sold on. Not surprising. It's the sort of history that people tend not to want in their property investments.

I didn't move away, though. I kept right on living there, and walked past the old boarded-up shop almost every day. As far as I'm aware it never actually had a name. I mean, it must have, but it wasn't clear from the front. Over the door was a large, hand-painted sign that simply read 'FOOD' in bright white capital letters, while a neon sign that protruded from it glowed with the word 'GRILL' on both sides in bright red. As the months of its closure started to turn into years, the old green paint on the window panes gradually started to fade and the large metal sheets that covered the windows and door were almost lost beneath a sea of posters and flyers advertising club nights and escorts.

Sometimes, if the light hit it just right, I could lean in and see inside through the tiny holes in the steel. I could see the bright shine of the fryer, the glass of the heating drawer, the tall column of metal that would have rotated the kebab. It all seemed somehow too clean for it to be so abandoned, and I was sure I could even see the vivid colours of soft drink cans in the clear-fronted fridge.

It was a grey, dull afternoon when I heard it. There was a miserable rain; the sort that doesn't even fall, it just seems to hang in the air, speckling your face with a fine, soaking mist. There wasn't a single patch of sky that disrupted the uniform gloom as I walked past the old takeaway. I stopped for a second, staring at the broken old building as I so often did, when I heard a sound from inside. It wasn't a loud sound, like something small and light falling to the floor.

I went closer, listening, but the sound didn't come again. Leaning

in, I tried to see through to the inside of the building, but the overcast day didn't give enough light to see by. I stood up, trying to convince myself that I had imagined it, when a cold breeze blew down, cutting through my coat, and I heard laughter. It was so quiet. I could have imagined it. Or maybe it came from one of the houses nearby, but I looked around and the windows were as dark and empty as the sky.

I turned back towards the shop, and noticed for the first time the missing bolts along the edge of the panel that covered the side window. It was ever so slightly ajar. The sound of movement came again, soft and furtive from inside. Someone was in there. I knew that much at least. So I left and called the police.

I walked to the pub across the road, bought a pint of pale ale and sat outside on the wooden benches. The drizzling rain diluted my beer slightly, but I didn't mind. I waited. Twenty minutes later a police car pulled up, and I sipped my drink as I watched them open up the door and head into the old takeaway.

Through the now-opened entrance I could still see the faded remnants of crime scene tape flapping gently in the wind. There was the sound of shouting, and I saw them pulling out a teenage white boy holding a can of red spray paint. Kid couldn't have been more than fourteen with a ratty old hoodie, and brand new sneakers the same colour as his paint can. The cops must have talked to the kid for a good ten minutes before they finally took the paint and let him go with a warning, like I knew they would the second I saw him. Figures.

The cops locked the old takeaway back up and went back to get in their car. The rain was coming down heavily now, and the one holding the spray can lost his grip on it. It wasn't a long drop from his hand to the pavement, but it must have hit a sharp stone or something, because when it clattered onto the ground part of it split open. The red seeped out of it, mixing with the flowing rainwater in a river of colour that made me very uneasy. The cops didn't seem to care; they just got back in their car and drove away.

I watched the place until I finished my drink. I wanted to see if they'd realise they'd still left the window panel partially open, where the kid had probably got in. If they did, they didn't come back to fix it. I was soaked to the bone by that point and decided to head home and get dry. My sleep that night wasn't great. I kept dreaming of a paint can impaled on a rotary kebab skewer. The liquid dripping from it bubbled and boiled in the heat, but it wasn't paint.

I woke up the next day bleary-eyed and exhausted, but my mind was still on that open window. I just couldn't shake it, and I knew I wouldn't be able to relax until I'd got to see the inside of that place. So I called a friend of mine, Leroy Yates, and told him what was going on. His hobby was somewhere in between urban exploration and housebreaking, so I wanted to talk it through with him.

He was over in Homerton, and offered to come help me out. I told him I reckoned I could handle it, but that if I didn't check in with him in an hour or so, he should come down, in case I had trouble of any kind. I grabbed a quick bite of cold sausage for breakfast, got

my big torch and a small prybar, then headed out into the morning.

The rain had stopped but the sun still hadn't come out and the wet shine seemed to weigh heavily on everything. There was nobody on the street. Most were probably at work already. The old takeaway sat there, the letters of 'FOOD' now grey and lifeless. For a second I thought I saw the red neon 'GRILL' sign flicker, but I'm pretty sure that was just my imagination, as I know the tubes were busted. I slipped around the side and found the metal panel covering the window was still ajar. I'm a bit bigger than a scrawny teen vandal, but it didn't take much coaxing before there was a gap wide enough for me to squeeze my way inside.

The air was cold and clean. I was in what must have been the storeroom and food prep area. There wasn't much light filtering through the tiny holes over the windows, so I turned my torch on and cast it about. It looked like anything perishable had been removed from the place, but other than that it seemed untouched. Sealed cans of pickled vegetables, vats of oil, rows and rows of clean, shining equipment. There wasn't a speck of dust on any of it, though it certainly didn't seem like it was in use.

My torch moved over the rest of the room until it fell upon the huge freezer. There were letters sprayed onto it, several inches high. It looked like this was what the kid had been doing. He'd been spraying the phrase 'MEAT IS MEAT' onto the door of the freezer, but the cops must have gotten him before he's finished, so what was actually written upon the matt silver surface were the words 'MEAT IS ME'.

I'm not going to pretend that a shiver didn't run right through me. It made me feel ever so faintly ill. In a fit of stubbornness, I decided that the only way to dispel this fear was to open the freezer. To know for sure that there was nothing inside. No meat of any sort. I walked over with a confidence I didn't really feel and gripped the handle. I took a breath and pulled. Inside the freezer… was absolutely nothing. No meat, no ice, not even a chill. It hadn't been on in years. I let out a sigh of relief. Which is when I heard a very quiet laughter from next to my feet.

I shined my light down and saw a face looking up at me from underneath the counter behind me. The face belonged to a gaunt, pale Chinese man, who looked up at me with a terrifying glee. In his spindly hands he held a pair of bolt cutters, with the blades positioned either side of my ankle. I barely had time to register this when he pulled them closed, cutting through my Achilles tendon. There was an intense spike of agony and I fell forward hard, smacking my head on the side of the counter. And… everything went dark.

When my eyes snapped open, I was laid out on a wooden floor. I couldn't move and, by the plastic I could feel digging into my flesh, I assumed I had been bound with cable ties. My ankle throbbed with pain, though not as sharply as I would have expected. The room was small and mostly bare, and looking at the windows I guessed I was on the upper floor of the old takeaway. A few shreds of fading sunlight were filtering in through the covered windows, but most of the light in the room came from a trio of oddly textured

candles a few feet from my head.

I strained my neck to look around the room. It seemed devoid of furniture but dotted around seemed to be small piles of bric-a-brac. I saw chipped teacups, a stack of what looked like old bibles and then something that made my breath catch in my throat. A small pile of human fingers. I could feel a despairing moan escape my chest before I could do anything to stop it.

At this, there was movement behind me and the man I had seen earlier stepped into view. He was shirtless, and the glow of the candles seemed to illuminate in stark shadow how painfully thin he seemed. He was chewing thoughtfully on something, though I couldn't see what, and held a long, sharp butcher's knife in his hand.

I tried to say something, but the words caught in my throat. What the hell are you supposed to say in that sort of situation? After a minute or two, he swallowed whatever he had been eating in a swift gulping motion, like an owl consuming a mouse. He smiled a smile of both satisfaction and expectation, and asked me if I was awake. He spoke with a crisp RP accent, which surprised me. You know what's messed up? Here was this guy clearly about to kill me and carve me up for meat, and I still somehow felt bad about making the assumption that he couldn't speak English, like I didn't want my last thoughts on Earth to be low-key racist.

I tried to ask him who he was, but again my breath caught in my throat. He seemed to notice, though, and walked over to me slowly.

He crouched down on his haunches, lowering his face to me, and asked me to speak up. I finally managed to croak out a question, asking who he was, but he just laughed that soft, disorientating laughter.

In a single, smooth motion the knife lashed out, cutting through my bound hands and neatly severing three of my fingers in a sudden burst of white-hot pain. I screamed, both from the injury and the hopes that someone might hear, but my captor didn't seem to notice or care. Instead he picked up my fingers one by one and tossed them off-handedly onto the pile behind him.

Walking over to the pile of old bibles he picked one up and started to distractedly leaf through it. He started talking again, asking if I knew that one of the reasons the Romans persecuted early Christians was because they believed them to be cannibals. Most people, he told me, assumed it was due to the Romans being confused over the nature of the "body and blood of Christ" that the early Christians were consuming, but that Octavius of Minucius Felix listed all sorts of grotesque accusations, including initiation rites that involved the murdering of an infant and drinking its blood.

He looked over to see if I was listening, which I was, though mostly in the hopes he wouldn't cut me again. I asked him if he was a Christian, and a look of irritation crossed his face. He shook his head and threw the bible back onto the pile, telling me that I wasn't listening, that I didn't understand, that the accusations were obviously false, like any iteration of the old blood libel, so of course

he wasn't a Christian, as they both honour and disregard the body, and then something about their view of the soul.

I was getting really lost at this point; he was rambling on about meat and souls and blood and I just lay there, waiting for him to kill me. I wanted to scream again, try to attract someone's attention from outside, but I didn't know what this thin, jagged man would do. He stopped his speech mid-sentence, as though he could tell I was no longer listening, and looked into my eyes with a grin. He started to walk towards me, the knife held loosely at his waist, a wetness on his lips, and in that moment I was a hundred percent sure I was going to die.

All at once a huge, dark shape barrelled into my captor, knocking him to the floor and sending the knife clattering to the ground. It was Leroy. He must have gotten worried waiting and come to find me. He stood over the thin, winded form and kicked it in the ribs, hard enough that I could hear something snap. Then he picked up the knife, walked over to me and cut through the cable ties keeping me in place.

He started to pull me to my feet before I could protest about my ankle, but surprisingly, it seemed to bear my weight without any problems. I looked down and, although I could plainly see dried blood all around it, my ankle was… fine. I stared in disbelief, then looked at my right hand, which still seemed to have all five fingers. It didn't make any sense. I could still see the ones he had cut-off on the pile. One of them bore my heavy silver ring, while the same finger on my hand did not.

I started to say something about this to Leroy, but as I did there was a sudden heat from behind me. We turned to see one of the candles had been pushed onto the pile of bibles, setting them almost instantly ablaze. I looked around quickly for anything to douse the flames, but I could see nothing, and the fire was already starting to spread up the wall. Leroy and I ran, keen to get away before the fire brigade or police arrived. I didn't see what happened to the man who had been cutting me, and we didn't stay to watch the old takeaway go up in flames.

It's still there, you know. Now a gutted, empty shell, smoke-blackened through the windows. I wonder if they'll ever get around to tearing it down. It doesn't really matter, though. I've decided to move.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Meat again. Not quite in the volumes of some previous statements, but still, a theme that continues to disconcert. First point to make is that I believe Mr. Goodall gave us a fake name and details when making his statement, as neither myself nor Sasha have been able to find any record of him to follow up, certainly none that match Martin's admittedly vague recollections about the man. Tim has confirmed the 27th of September 2009 as the date of the fire that destroyed the takeaway in question, which was registered as "Waltham Express Grill", but can find no record of anything out of the ordinary about the fire, which was put down to unknown local

vandals. We've also been unable to find anything on a teenager being picked up for trespass on that property, though that's not a particular surprise.

I've had Martin looking into the case of John Haan, though it's slow going, as whenever there's a picture he ends up needing to take a breath of fresh air. Apparently, Haan was second-generation British Chinese, marrying his wife Lanying shortly after she arrived in the country, and setting up Waltham Express Grill. He seems to have been utterly normal, according to the testimony of his former employees.

What Martin did find, is that according to the coroner there was a noticeable lack of defensive wounds on what remained of Lanying's body, and some of the injuries seemed like they might have been self-inflicted. From my perspective, however, what is more interesting is that six months before his arrest, John Haan let the last of his staff go and replaced them with a nephew of his who had recently moved over from China.

The nephew's name was Haan Tao, although upon moving to this country he took the name 'Tom Haan'. I've checked, and this is the same Tom Haan who was employed at the Dalston meat processing plant from late 2009 until his disappearance in 2013.

I doubt this is the last we hear of him and his strange relationship with meat.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

I still haven't been back down in the tunnels, though my earlier conversation with Basira puts me in *some* hopes that I may be able to request help with it sooner rather than later. Only to wait and see what comes of this operation of hers. I rather hope that she… I hope she's okay.

And part of me hopes Daisy isn't there.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG073 – Police Lights

Statement #0171102

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Here.

BASIRA

Thanks.

ARCHIVIST

I assume it didn't go well, then?

BASIRA

[Swallows drink] We lost Altman. Just… wasn't… paying attention. Don't know what they're going to tell his family. Guess it could have been worse, though, if I hadn't talked to you first. So, thanks.

ARCHIVIST

I'm surprised you're here. Surely you have a lot of paperwork after something like that? A lot of forms to sign?

BASIRA

They've given us a few days 'compassionate leave'. I think they just want us out of the way while they figure out the official version of what happened.

ARCHIVIST

Well, I'd like to hear the real one, if you're ready?

BASIRA

Yeah. How much context do you need?

ARCHIVIST

You said it started with a kidnapping case?

BASIRA

Yeah. Callum Brodie. Twelve… twelve years old. Disappeared from his home in Dalston three weeks ago. Sitter was asleep when the mother came home, the front door was open, there was no sign of him. There was no forced entry, so it started out as a missing persons case, but they got a witness claiming he'd seen three unknown figures entering the Brodies' home that night, so it was kicked up to Serious Crime. There was some back and forth with Kidnap Squad since no ransom demand had been made, but not much progress in terms of finding the kid.

I only found out about all this when we were suiting up yesterday. The Brodie case had nothing to do with my department or my borough. When me and Daisy got the call that we were being

brought in for an operation to recover the kid, it was… it was totally out of the blue. The sergeant in charge had to brief us in the van.

I had no idea why we'd been called in until I looked at the other officers involved and saw a good few of them… they were fellow signees of a Section 31. Whatever we were heading towards, it was going to be weird. I think the sergeant in charge must have been sectioned as well, but I didn't know him. It's not too surprising, though. I mean, it's not like any of us have a full list of sectioned officers, but one must exist somewhere.

It looked like most of the others had made the same connection, and none of us were feeling right about it. I mean, we had a counter-terrorist firearms squad with us, which didn't exactly put my mind at ease.

That said, I wasn't exactly sad we might be getting some sectioned firearms officers, but it was just a lot, you know? The briefing was pretty short. We were told that Callum Brodie had been found and it was suspected he was being held by a man named Maxwell Rayner, with an unknown number of accomplices. There were suspicions that there might be cult involvement. That's when I phoned you.

ARCHIVIST

And did the lights help at all?

BASIRA

Oh, I'm… I'm getting to that. I told the sergeant, and he didn't even ask me where I'd gotten the information. He just nodded and told everyone to load up on torches. The firearms team wasn't short on tactical gear so, by the time we headed inside, we had two or three heavy duty flashlights each. I had four.

The building was in an industrial complex up in Harringay. It was a two-storey brick building with a weathered sign claiming it belonged to Outer Bay Shipping. We were instructed to go inside in teams of two, with one armed officer paired with one sectioned. You… you have to understand, that was massively against protocol, but I guess they wanted to be sure that none of the firearms team encountered anything weird without being accompanied by anyone experienced. I looked around to see if the others were going to make anything of it, but no-one made a peep. I think everyone knew that this was about as far from a normal operation as they came.

I was paired with an older guy. Goodman, I think his name was, though we didn't really talk. The way he carried his weapon in the van, I could tell he'd been handling it awhile, but I couldn't help but notice his hands were shaking slightly as we made our way around the building.

We were going in through the loading dock at the rear, and as we approached the security lights that lit the rest of the estate seemed to get dimmer. Well, not dimmer, really, they just didn't illuminate the place as much as they should have. Aside from a small pool of white light directly below, the darkness around them didn't seem to

be affected. I didn't have much time to think about it before the order came down and we were going in.

I cut the padlock on the metal gate and slid it up while Goodman gave me some cover. The inside seemed normal. Pallets of boxes were neatly lined up on shelves around the loading bay, and the heavy lamps overhead gave us plenty of light. We started to make a sweep of the area, eyes peeled for anything that looked out of place. I took a second to check a few of the larger boxes but they didn't contain anything remarkable. Mostly sheets of plastic for manufacturing, although some were full of copper piping or paint. And that's when I heard the scream.

It came from behind one of the shelves to my left and it didn't sound like a cry of fear or pain. It was a scream of rage, almost animal-like, and when I turned I saw a figure moving behind me. It was only for a second, but it seemed to be dressed head to toe in black, like a leotard or one of those morphsuits. It was hard to say for sure, as it was less than a second before it darted back behind the shelves and Goodman opened fire.

I hadn't prepared myself for it, and the sudden gunshot sent a jolt of pain shooting through my head as my eardrums rang with the noise. Goodman called something to me but I couldn't make out a word of it. I just followed him as he ran around to where the figure had disappeared to. There was no sign of it, although a small spray of fresh blood told me that my jumpy new partner's aim had been too wide of the mark.

We… we started to hear sporadic gunfire from the rest of the building. I mean, it was basically all I could hear at that point as everything else was still a muffled, high-pitched whine. I was worried Goodman might panic at this, but to his credit he seemed to have pulled himself together and we finished the sweep of the loading bay before heading through to the rest of the building.

I saw a handful of armed officers heading up the stairs to the upper floor, and I was going to follow them when I felt a tug on my arm. Goodman was… he was saying something and pointing towards the other direction. I saw a pair of uniforms and a face I recognised. Leo Altman, one of the sectioned officers from up in Waltham Forest. I had met him once before, when Daisy took me out for some very quiet drinks with a few other sectioned cops she knew. I remembered him being one of the friendlier ones, though he still stopped short of telling any stories.

Leo was stood with an armed officer that I didn't know. From her lack of trigger discipline it looked like she was either very new or seriously rattled. They were staring down a long metal staircase that seemed to lead into what must have been the building's basement. The briefing hadn't mentioned anything about a basement, and it was clear they weren't entirely sure how to proceed.

When me and Goodman joined them it seemed to make up their minds and, with a quick nod to us, Leo and his partner started to head down. I didn't want to follow, and I could see that Goodman wasn't too keen either, but we weren't just going to leave them

without backup, so down we went.

At the bottom of the stairs was a door. It was old and made of steel that had started to rust around the edges. But… it wasn't right. You know how when the lights are turned on in a room and you can see it from outside? Like, a thin line of light leaking under the doorway? Well, it was like that, except what seemed to seep out from underneath it wasn't light.

It was shadow. Like, if darkness was somehow shining from behind it. As I got closer I started to hear something. I couldn't really tell what it was under the buzzing in my ears, but the best way I could describe it is that it sounded like a waterfall, but slowed right down. A steady, flowing crash and churn, but deep and drawn out. I wanted to ask the others if they heard it as well, but Leo was already moving to open the door. I barely had time to get my torch out.

I'm glad I did, though, because as the door opened, every light in the building went dark.

That moment I was in complete darkness had to be one of the longest seconds of my life. I felt like I'd gone blind. Not just my eyes but everything. Like every sense I had was severed and the only thing I could feel was a wave of nausea. It seemed like, for that second, I wasn't anywhere that light had ever reached. Then, I clicked the button on my torch and the beam cut right through it.

The flashlight was weak, nothing like the power I would have

expected from the heavy bulb, but the faint glow was enough to bring me back to myself. I shone it behind me, over the pale, panicked faces of the others and, as it touched each of them, I saw them start and reach for their own torches. Soon four pale beams were struggling out into the thick, aggressive gloom.

I turned around, trying to shine the light on the wall or even the door we came in from, anything that would give me a sense of the room we were standing in, but it just disappeared into the pitch dark in all directions. Thinking about it now, I realise, we never actually walked through the door.

Small flecks of black dust floated in the air, like… like inky snow. They moved gently through the torchlight and they never seemed to settle on the ground, and I began to realise how cold it was. Everything was so still, and the only sound was the same dull roar from up ahead of us. I don't know how long we stood there, but when my torch sputtered and died, I knew we didn't have long.

I took out another and turned it on. The light seemed even fainter than the first one. Still, it was something, and we started to walk forward, or at least what we assumed was forward. If anyone said anything I didn't hear it. The black dust danced in front of us, but it never seemed to actually touch us or land on our clothing. There was no smell at all here. The building above us had smelt of sawdust, old metal and industrial cleaner, but down here there was nothing. I didn't… I didn't shine my torch upwards. I didn't want to see if there was a roof over our heads.

By this point we had easily walked the whole length of the building several times and still hadn't seen anything. The roar was getting louder and louder, until it was all that was in my head. The four of us were all on our second or third torches by that point, and I could feel that I was starting to panic. There was a scream building up inside of me, clawing its way up my throat. Actually, you know what? I might have been screaming. I don't know. It was… it was impossible to tell over the noise and the thick, choking darkness. Then Goodman's flashlight beam hit something ahead of us and it… it all went to hell.

I think it took about five seconds. Everything seemed to happen at once, and only going over it in the reports afterwards was I able to process what I saw. Five seconds and everything was over, but I'll try and describe it in as much detail as I can.

Goodman's torch beam had landed on an old man. He was tall, but I couldn't say much more than that. His body was hidden in the folds of a robe of some sort. It was the same colour as the dust that had filled the air and seemed to move and shift in the same way. His white hair was thin and wild, covering an unkempt face and a scraggly beard. His eyes were milky white. I think he was blind. From the description the sergeant had given us, I was sure this was Maxwell Rayner.

Next to him was an old chair that looked like it could have come from a dinner table. The wood was stained, covered in dark mould, and tied to it with thin metal wire was Callum Brodie. The kid's eyes were blank, though not clouded like the old man's, and his

face was locked in a silent scream.

Rayner was facing him, thin, bony hands raised to his face. Something was… something was flowing out of his mouth. It looked like ink, but it flowed more like a heavy fog than any sort of liquid. It drips down his forearms and onto the floor, where it… it rolled towards Callum, climbing up the chair and oozing across the boy's body towards his face. It was moving slowly, and had just reached his chest. The roaring sound seemed to come as it convulsed out of the old man's mouth.

Then Goodman opened fire. The muzzle flash seemed impossibly bright as it cut through the dark and… I could swear that, for a second, the room it lit up was not a basement but a cathedral. He let off three shots in a quick burst, and every one of them hit Rayner square in the chest. His robe twitched violently as he staggered backwards, and all the dark liquid suddenly washed down onto the floor in a single movement, leaving Callum untouched. It still gushed from his mouth, though, and as the shots tore through him he spun about and an arc of the dark substance flew through the air.

Altman had started running towards them as soon as he had seen the kid, and was almost at the chair when the wave of it spewed out. A few droplets hit him on the cheek and he started to howl and claw at his face. Goodman fired again at Rayner, dropping him to the ground, and the horrendous noise stopped suddenly, leaving only Leo's cries of pain.

The lights came on all at once, and in the sudden painful brightness none of us had time to do anything as a woman who hadn't been there a moment ago ran up to Leo. She wore a robe similar to the old man's, and by the time any of us had seen the knife in her hand she had buried it in Altman's throat. More gunshots, this time from the officer who had partnered with Leo, but she was too slow. By the time the woman with the knife had been dropped, he was already bleeding out on the floor.

Five seconds. Two dead kidnappers, one dead police officer… and silence. We were standing in a small basement room lit by dingy fluorescent bulbs, no sign of the black liquid or any sort of dust. The kid seemed fine. I mean, I'm sure he'll need a lot of counselling, but he didn't seem physically any worse for wear.

Goodman went to untie him while I ran to check on Altman. It was too late, of course, but as I looked at his still, cold face, I saw his eyes were a milky white.

The rest of the squad arrived a few seconds later and helped to take us back out to the van. After that it was all questions, debrief cups of coffee I never quite got around to drinking. And Section 31 forms. Lots of them.

All in all there were five people killed in that building, including Leo Altman. Aside from Rayner and the woman, who was identified from an old report as Natalie Ennis, two more were shot and killed when they attacked some of the other officers. Three more were subdued and arrested, but as far as I know they still haven't said a

word. God knows how they're going to process them with all the secrecy around the operation, but thankfully that's not my problem. I think they were connected to that cult group from way back, the Church of the Divine whatever.

ARCHIVIST

The People's Church of the Divine Host. Rayner was their leader back in the early Nineties. I have a few statements related to them if you're interested. Natalie Ennis was actually one of the…

BASIRA

No. I'm not interested. Not even a little. I've been thinking a lot over the past few days, and I'm done. With the police, with Section 31, all of it. I wanted to tell you in person. And give you the statement. It seemed the least I could do.

ARCHIVIST

You're really quitting?

BASIRA

Yeah. And you should too. This place… It's not right. Goodbye, John.

[Door opens]

ARCHIVIST

Basira, wait. What about the tapes?

BASIRA

What?

ARCHIVIST

The tapes. Fr… from Gertrude's case. Is there any way I can –

[Door closes]

No, I suppose not.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Well, that seems to close the book on Maxwell Rayner. Maybe the whole People's Church of the Divine Host. I can't help but feel I've got the last chapter of a story and I don't even know the title. At least I hope it's the last chapter. I still can't find much about the company Outer Bay Shipping. Looks like a shell corporation, but tracking corporate ownership is not something I'm skilled at.

I'm disappointed with Ms. Hussain's decision. It's not exactly a surprise, though. I've… thought about quitting myself. It's not an

option, of course. I'm in far too deep now. I get the impression that to quit would be giving up whatever small protection I seem to have here. I just wished… I don't know.

Oddly enough, all I can think about is: how did the police know where Rayner was keeping the boy? Basira didn't seem to know, and the Church clearly wasn't expecting the police to arrive. With a few exceptions, Rayner managed to stay off the grid for two decades. How did they find him now? Someone must have known what was happening and tipped them off. And I don't think it was anyone inside that building.

End supplement.

[CLICK]

MAG074 - Fatigue

Statement #0150806

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Lydia Halligan regarding her insomnia. Original statement given 8th June, 2015. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I don't know when I last slept. It's not that I can't remember, it's just that I can't really tell. When I manage to steal an hour or so, if that's even happened, my dreams seem so vivid and my waking so disjointed, that they blur together. Like all I have are scenes and images, devoid of context, and no true way to tell what is real and what is not.

I'm lying in my bed. It's hot. I know the central heating is off but the air still has that dry warmth that scratches your throat. I want to get up, to move, but my body is too tired, all the strength in it gone. I just lie there, watching the ceiling fan spin round and around and around, a dull whirring that grinds against my brain. It

is dark outside, and the only light is the glow from my small bedside lamp. As I watch it, my eyes adjusting to the motion, the fan slows. It loses its momentum gradually, until at last it is completely still and there is silence. I wait, and it begins to turn again in the other direction. Now spinning anticlockwise, it accelerates until the blades are once again a blur. I do not remember my flat having a ceiling fan when I moved in.

I've always had problems sleeping. Even as a child, my mother would always check my room to find me reading well into the night. If I heard her coming up the stairs, I would turn off my light and dive beneath the covers to try and convince her I was sound asleep. If it worked, I would listen to her walk off to her room, and then bring out my book once again. At the time I thought it was because I loved reading, but looking back I think it must have been the first stirrings of insomnia.

There is a billboard outside my flat. It overlooks a small roundabout and used to have adverts for whatever the latest TV drama was. The metal that holds it up is old and rusted, and sometimes I think I can hear it groaning ever so quietly as I walk past. Now it has an advert for coffee. I assume that is what it's advertising. It's a woman, bright and cheerful, with a sky-blue blouse and shining white smile. She holds a cup of coffee, the steam rising and curling in front of her eyes. There is no brand name or information, just the words, "Sleep is overrated" in a tall, thin font. I don't know how long it has been there. Her eyes seem to look in through my window.

I work as a freelance writer. It's not a good job. Very little of it

actually involves writing, the rest is chasing up invoices, desperately firing off pitches and worrying over a budget spreadsheet that doesn't add up. I always thought it suited my schedule, allowing me to be flexible, but it has in many ways just robbed me of any connection to the way the rest of the world organises itself. I never know what day of the week it is. When I don't sleep the days and nights just bleed together. Sometimes it feels that even my clock is lying to me, telling me that an hour lasts so much longer than it should, then stealing an entire morning in the blink of an eye.

There is a man in my living room. He is tall, with sandy blond hair that twists into unruly curls. I must have invited him in. He sits in my armchair, drumming his fingers together. They make an odd, clacking sound when they touch. I know him, though I have no idea where we might have met. His smile is friendly but I don't like it. I apologise, tell him I've forgotten his name and he waves it away, saying that names are overrated, then asks how my day has been. I tell him I don't know which day he means, and he laughs and laughs and laughs until my nose begins to bleed. I see the blood dripping onto the patterns I have been drawing. How long have I been drawing? It isn't my pen.

What's the longest you've ever stayed awake? As a student I liked to push myself, conduct little experiments on my own capacity for fatigue, time how many hours and then try to beat my record. After a while I stopped counting, though for some reason I never really stopped thinking of them as experiments. At first I tried to convince

friends to stay up with me. Sometimes they would but they never lasted more than forty hours, and I always felt too awkward to stay up after they had crashed. Eventually, I began just doing it alone, relishing the feeling that I had somehow seen beyond what they were able to.

I'm sitting in a cafe. It's open all night and I go there when I'm feeling restless late at night. I try to imagine I'm sitting in Hopper's "Nighthawks at the Diner", but there is a thin layer of grease on the plastic tables that dispels any romanticism about the place. I'm drinking a cup of coffee. The coffee is awful, the cheapest instant that money can buy wholesale. I don't care. It is black and opaque and when I drink it, I can feel the tiniest bit of life seep through me as the caffeine enters my blood. I take a long sip and stop. The coffee has something in it. Smooth and hard. I spit it onto the table. It's a tooth. I check, but I am not missing any. It's small, like a child's milk tooth, and it just sits there. The waitress comes over to see if I want food, even though I never do. Her name tag reads "Vanessa". I point to the shiny white lump now lying on the table. I don't think she sees it, and if she does, she does not react. She goes to get me more coffee.

Your vision goes strange when you don't sleep for a long time. I think it's something to do with changing pressure on your eyeballs. You start to detect faint movements on the edges, on the periphery, and if you stare too long at a flat surface it starts to gently pulse and move. I wrote a short story once where it was things trying to push through into our dimension, strange ghostly creatures that

could only be seen by those who had so deprived themselves of rest that their mind opened itself. In the end the protagonist finally saw them fully, and they blinded her. But maybe it's just the mind becoming too tired to properly process the signals your eyes send. So much of what we see and hear are just useful lies that our brain tells us, filtering out the useless bits and adding in what it expects to see. No-one ever knows what they're really seeing or hearing.

The billboard is damp. A sudden rainstorm has soaked it through and the paper peels away at the corner. The sky-blue blouse is now mottled and mouldy; the smile has warped into a sneer. The coffee is still steaming, the swirls of the steam unaffected by the rain, though the brightness in her eyes has turned into a vicious glare. I can see the rust in the metal supports more clearly now, and they seem to bend ever so slightly when they groan. The text now reads: "Sleep is for the weak".

When you don't sleep, your energy goes in cycles. Your body will go through phases where it seems to be trying to completely shut itself down, and keeping your eyes open is quite literally a physical struggle. Then all at once you'll enter a period of manic energy, a second, third or fourth wind that leaves you giddy and nauseous, struggling to find an outlet for your sudden rush. Sometimes there is a euphoria with this; other times it's more like desperation. As you get further and further into it, these cycles get closer and closer together, until your entire self seems to change hour by hour. Of course, when you have insomnia, it doesn't matter how much your body tries to send you to sleep in the lulls, it simply doesn't have

the ability to do so. Like your whole self is trying to push you into bed, but it is covered by a solid granite block.

The man is back. This time I am on a bench in the park. The clouds roll and curl gently in the pale sky of dawn. He is twisting long blades of grass into strange spirals, but his fingers keep cutting through them instead. Is this when we met? He looks at me, his face impassive… if I even see a face. He tells me that I look terrible. I try to focus, but his body shifts and undulates like so much else when I try to focus. I tell him I haven't slept, and he nods and tells me that's ok. He is lying, and it makes me very afraid.

They say that sleep is the most important factor in long-term health. Night workers are apparently at risk for all sorts of problems but not nearly so much as shift workers who are never able to settle into a proper long-term sleep schedule. The body needs time to rest and repair itself. Caffeine and drugs and adrenaline can give you all the energy you need, but they can't give you the rest that keeps you healthy. I don't like to think about what this might be doing to my insides, what it might lead to in the future, but it doesn't really matter. Time is not exactly as firm a concept to me now as it perhaps once was. My head is too heavy to give much thought to a clock.

I am running through the city. The alleyways are narrow and winding and do not turn all the directions that they should. The smell chokes me and my body is heavy as stone. I lean against a wall and, for a second, I am unsure if I will ever be able to stand myself up again. I stagger through another street then I stop. I lie

down on the tarmac and it is warm and soft under me. I feel sleep begin to overtake me, but I am wrong. It is dawn, and all that comes over me is faint and sickly sunlight. I can hear his laugh again, and my mouth tastes like burnt coffee.

I do not know why I am here. I know this place and what you want, but I have no proof to give you. I have nothing that cannot be waved away as a bad dream. By you, at least. I cannot wave, for my arms are too heavy and my hands are busy drawing those strange, familiar curves. What do you want? To find a child's tooth and hold it up triumphant, a talisman to conjure those things that you should fear. To photograph and analyse a billboard that has never once advertised coffee. To talk to a person who is not a person and whose strange laugh you should be fleeing? I am here, and I give you my words. They are all I have, and all you want, and perhaps when I am free of them then I will be allowed to sleep.

I am standing before the billboard. It is night, though a nasty ray of daylight makes it glow a dying pink. The roundabout is empty and will never see a car again. It just goes around and around and around with no way on and no end to be had. The woman is baring her teeth in a triumphant snarl, her blouse now stained with the same rust that laces through the bars that support her. Her eyes slough off her face, revealing the twisted shapes of whatever the poster is that sits behind her. The steam that rises from the coffee is the same. Always the same, always undisturbed, curling in on itself. The words that stand stark above it: "Sleep no more". I walk toward the billboard, and my sobs are drowned out by the screaming of

rusted struts as they bend. The scream of the metal, buckling under the fatigue, the scream of the woman as she bears down upon me. It collapses on top of me, and I collapse with it.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Erm… a difficult statement. I am forced to agree with Ms. Halligan regarding how verifiable what she says is. There's no way to confirm it isn't a series of bad dreams. It sounds like a series of bad dreams. A cry for help from a woman with a very severe problem. There are no details to follow up, save for Ms. Halligan herself, who passed away from a heart attack less than a month after giving this statement. She was 29.

This time last year I would have dismissed her as a kook, wasting our time. But a year changes a lot, and I now recognise the description of a tall man with curly blond hair and an unnerving laugh all too well. Michael, did you drive her to this? Another victim of your warped games? Or were you simply drawn like a vulture? Or maybe a shark sensing blood. What do you want from your victims?

I'm rather glad I don't really drink coffee.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

I know who's living in the tunnels. Well, that's not exactly true. I don't know their identity, but I've seen them. Shortly after Basira came to see me, I decided not to request her help with the tunnels. It has become clear she has her own concerns to be dealing with, and I am becoming less and less convinced that further police involvement won't result in more issues down the road. So, shortly after she left, I decided to get somewhat more proactive and purchased a small motion-sensor camera, which I hid in view of the trapdoor. After a week, I reviewed the footage.

It is remarkably poor quality, far below what the specifications of the setup should yield. It may be I was unfair to Elias about his difficulties setting up CCTV in the Archives. Nonetheless, I was able to make out enough. For a start, I saw Sasha, on two separate occasions, entering and leaving the tunnels. I assume she must have gotten a copy of the key from somewhere, but it seems that when I met her down there earlier she probably wasn't simply following me out of concern.

It's not enough to confront her with yet; if she's working against us I don't want to tip my hand too early, but I'll keep a closer eye on her. There's definitely something she's hiding. It may even be she knows the other individual I saw emerging from the trapdoor.

As I said, I do not recognise them. They appear to be a man, or at least male-presenting. Middle-aged or older judging from the frame, but hard to be sure. They emerge around three in the morning, holding what appears to be an attaché case. Then, they spend about half an hour rifling through archives, and retreat back down after stuffing a handful of files into the case.

On the one hand, this does reassure me that whatever's down there is human, but what worries me is the manner they leave the trapdoor. Rather than picking the lock or forcing their way through, they seem to move the floor itself out of their way somehow, and replace it when they return. I've triple checked, and the area surrounding the trapdoor is completely solid. Human or not, that worries me.

I will leave the camera set up for now and, hopefully, gather some further information, maybe get a clearer picture of their face. Whatever this individual may be, I do not want to confront them unprepared.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG075 – A Long Way Down

Statement #0060711

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Stephen Walker, regarding his brother's disappearance from the top of Tour Montparnasse in October 2006. Original statement given November 7th, 2006. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I hope my brother is dead. He must be dead. I would love to believe that this is all some elaborate prank, some bizarre attempt to fake his own disappearance, but deep down I know that's not my brother. So he is dead. If not, I can't even begin to comprehend how dreadful a fate that would be. Some fears can only be endured for so long.

My brother Grant was always afraid of heights. I remember we used to climb trees as children. He would always get scared halfway up, and it would be an hour of coaxing and reassurance before he managed to climb down. He still tried to climb them, though. That

was my brother: always full of bravery and optimism until the moment the terror set kicked in. He never did have the strongest survival instinct.

Generally he was fine with tall buildings, if they had a lift. Stairs were often more of a problem, especially if there were windows from which he could see the ground getting further away. Still, the majority of his phobia, strangely enough, was focused on ladders.

That's not to say he fainted with horror just being in the same room as one, just that climbing up and down ladders was a particular sort of torture for Grant. Those few occasions when I saw him do so, the stark white terror I saw etched on his face with every slight rattle or shift of the thing, was enough to convince me that this wasn't some quirk to be gently mocked over Christmas dinner; it was a real and intense manifestation of his phobia.

For the most part it didn't affect our lives that much. We shared a small house in Jarrow, up near Newcastle, and it took more than a second floor to freak Grant out, although he pointedly never climbed the small stepladder that led up to the attic. The living arrangements were less than ideal, as Grant had been abruptly fired from his admin position with Deloitte in January so he didn't contribute much to the house except for an indentation on the sofa. I hadn't really wanted to take him in. I mean, it's not that I don't love him or anything, he's my brother, it's just that we'd always got on best when we spent most of our time apart. Familiarity does breed some sorts of contempt better than others, and I knew that we were unlikely to be domestically suited to each other, as I am by

nature quite fastidious in ways that I know my brother is not. However, I had recently gone through a break-up, and there were only so many well-meaning hints from my parents about what to do with the newly-spare room that, in the end, I caved and invited him to live with me.

Work had been slow coming for Grant. By the time he lost the job with Deloitte, his knowledge of database administration had been so specific and specialist, that he was struggling to find jobs that fit his skillset. Which meant more time for him to spend making our living room look like a bombsite.

I'm sorry. I know how this must sound, but I feel it's important you understand why I took him up to Tour Montparnasse in the first place. I couldn't have known what would happen. Deep down, though, in the hidden corners of my scepticism, I know it's not my fault. I know it's because of the man with the lightning scar. He did this. I don't know how and I don't know why, but he took my brother away from me, and if I ever see him again, I'm going to kill him.

The first time we saw him was when I broke my arm. It was about a year ago, just after Halloween. We'd both been out to a party the night before; I had managed to lose my keys, and it was only as we approached our front door that Grant decided it was the right time to announce he'd left his keys in the house, assuming I'd have mine. I was quite upset by this, and we had something of a row out there in the front garden, both of us yelling through blistering hangovers. We couldn't get a locksmith, as that would take hours and cost us a

lot of money that, with Grant unemployed and living with me, I did not have. After another few minutes of recriminations, I spotted that Grant had left his window ever so slightly ajar. Normally I would have reminded him that leaving a window open invites burglars, but in this case that was almost exactly what we wanted.

I knocked on the door of the house next to ours. Jim Hancock was not the best of neighbours. He was the closest thing to a cartoon Cockney that I've ever met, and had a habit of blasting music loud enough to bleed through the walls of our terraced house. He was, however, a builder, which meant that he would have a ladder. He did and, after having a nice abrasive laugh at our situation, he went and fetched it. He wasn't interested in helping with the actual entrance to our home, and told us to leave the ladder in front of his garden, apparently unconcerned by the prospect of thieves.

Obviously I was the one going up the ladder. We placed it in the garden, trying to get the end nestled in the crook of the window, and I started to climb. It was less stable than I had anticipated. Grant was gripping it at the bottom, but the ground was softer than I thought, and as I reached for the window, I felt my stomach drop as the ladder pitched slowly to the side. I'd love to say that next thing I knew I was on the ground with a broken arm, but I remember every second of that fall. Like it was happening in slow motion. The rush of cold autumn air as I fell. The impact of my arm against the low brick wall. The sickening crunch.

I lay there, my arm in absolute agony, as Grant ran over to check on me. It was clear that the bone was broken and we needed to call an

ambulance. My phone had been smashed in the fall, and when I asked Grant to use his, he got very quiet and told me sheepishly that it, like his keys, was still inside the house. Grant started knocking on people's doors but no-one answered. Maybe they weren't home, or maybe they had heard our blazing row and didn't want to help us. Even Jim didn't seem inclined to open his door a second time. It was becoming more and more clear that our only option was for Grant to climb in and get his phone, and I could see from his pale, frightened face that he had come to the same conclusion.

To his credit, I didn't have to talk him into it. My obvious agony seemed to do that for me. He hoisted the ladder off the ground and pushed it close to the window. Then he stood there at the bottom, droplets of sweat visible on his face, and looked at me. He placed his foot on the lowest rung and began to climb. It was slow and watching it was almost as painful as my shattered bone. His neck was rigid, stiff with the will not to look down. He was barely ten feet off the ground, and every time the ladder shifted slightly he made a small sound of terror. He kept his face away from me but I think he might have been crying.

It was as Grant was making his gradual ascent that I saw the man with the scar. He was stood there, just across the street, watching us. He was short, and wore an old grey suit, faded with age, that didn't seem to match his relatively youthful face. He wasn't wearing a tie, and the top two buttons of his shirt were undone, revealing a jagged array of pale white scar tissue that seemed to climb up the

side of his neck like a flash of lightning. His pale eyes were entirely focused on Grant making his excruciating way up the ladder. If he noticed me watching him, he gave no sign of it. When I looked at him, I had the strangest feeling, like a wave of dizziness washing over me, and my stomach dropped again, like it had when I fell. I tried to tell myself it was just from the pain in my arm making me feel ill, but it faded every time I looked away from that strange, scarred man who watched my brother.

I looked back to Grant, who was nearly at the top and clearly struggling. His hands were so slick with sweat he was having trouble holding on to the metal rungs, and he was swaying dangerously. I was certain I was about to watch him fall like I had, but just as I was sure he was about to lose his grip he reached out and got his arm into the open window. He grabbed hold of something inside, and started to pull himself through.

Soon his torso had disappeared into the window, then his legs. Everything was quiet; I suddenly felt very alone. I turned to look at the man with the scar but it seemed like he had decided to move on. I could see him a little way down the street, walking away faster than I would have expected. I just lay there, with nothing to keep me company but the pain of my injury.

Then I heard the sound of the latch, cutting through the silence, and the front door opened to reveal Grant, still soaked in sweat, triumphantly clutching his phone. I congratulated him on overcoming his fear before gently reminding him that the reason we needed the phone was to call an ambulance. He nodded like he

hadn't forgotten, and made the call.

The ambulance and hospital did pass in a bit of a blur. There was an X-ray, and a lot more detail about the specifics of the break than I really thought was necessary for the treatment instructions of "keep it in a cast and try not to move it". It was irritating, but it wasn't as if it was the first time I had broken a bone. Time passed, I healed, and I forgot about the strange man who had watched my brother almost fall.

My brother finally got another job shortly before Christmas, with Deloitte again, though a different department, but he didn't seem inclined to move out of the room in my house. He did offer to cover the rent for a few months, which I did appreciate, as paying it solo had wiped out a good deal of my savings. It wasn't like I had other housemates lining up to join me, so I resolved to make the best of it and live with his irritating habits. It was fine, you know. We didn't get on any better than we had when he was unemployed, but without the lingering resentment of money I could just about tolerate his occasional hygiene issues. And life rolled on.

It was about two months ago that I started planning for Paris. There was a conference I was due to speak at, and I hadn't had a holiday since I broke up with Carly, so I decided to take a full week there to really relax. I did not invite Grant, which you would have thought would make him think twice about coming with me, but you'd be wrong. As soon as I mentioned it to him, he was online checking if there were any more seats on my flight. There were. Then he kept bugging me to change my hotel booking to a twin room until I

finally relented and did so. Every time I mentioned something I was planning to do he would invite himself along, generally getting me to arrange it and saying he'd pay me back. I'm sure he intended to, and was just excited to spend some time hanging out in Paris, but at the start of October he lost his job again.

He had been caught smoking weed on company property. It hadn't been on the clock at the time, and he managed to talk them out of actually calling the police, but he was dismissed on the spot and told in no uncertain terms that he was not welcome to apply for any further vacancies. I imagine he wasn't going to get a reference, either. He was devastated, of course, and I will admit that I wasn't as sympathetic as I could have been. From my point of view, it was his own damn fault; because of it I was suddenly on the hook for a reasonable amount of money. It was clear that when we went to Paris I was going to have to pay for him, and he was so despondent that I didn't have the heart to tell him he couldn't come.

So that's why, when we went to Paris three weeks ago, I was both seriously pissed at Grant, and in almost complete control of where we went while we were there. I think that's why I decided to take him up Tour Montparnasse. There was no way I was going to get him up the Eiffel Tower, but I reckoned, correctly, that he wouldn't have heard of the Tour Montparnasse, the actual highest point in Paris accessible by the public. It just looked like a normal skyscraper, so I reckoned it probably wouldn't ring any alarm bells for him until we were actually in the lift.

You've got to understand I just wanted to freak him out a little bit.

He'd have a bit of a panic, I'd pretend to have forgotten about his phobia, and we'd head back down with me feeling slightly avenged. I couldn't have known.

At first it was all going exactly according to plan. I was vague about the attraction we were going to see, and he clearly hadn't heard of the Tour Montparnasse, so he didn't make any fuss when we went inside, even when we first got into the elevator. As it started to rise, though, I saw the apprehension start to creep across his face and he asked where the lift was taking us. I had to fight to suppress a smile as I told him we were heading up to the best view in Paris and his face started to drain of colour. By the time we reached the top his legs were shaking so badly he was finding it hard to stand. I feigned concern, though inside I was savouring his discomfort more than was probably healthy.

I helped him out of the lift, and he turned around almost immediately, about to get back in, but something about the idea of going back down again so soon clearly caused him to hesitate. He mumbled something about sitting down and collecting his thoughts, and staggered over to a seat a good distance away from the barriers that surrounded the building's rooftop observation terrace.

I left him to collect his thoughts and walked over to the edge. The view was breathtaking. I could see all of Paris stretching out before me, including the Eiffel Tower. And in the mid-morning sun it was one of the most beautiful and serene things I had ever seen.

It was as I gazed at the majestic city below me that I felt a lurch in

my stomach, like I was falling, and I pitched forward into the barrier, bruising my arm and sending an agonising echo of my broken bone shooting up my body. I braced myself on my hands and knees, trying to overcome the sudden swimming nausea in my head. Finally, I managed to centre my vision enough to look up and there he was. There was an icy breeze that high up, but he seemed not to notice as his loose, thin shirt billowed around that sprawling white scar. He stared at me, and I felt again like I was falling right through the floor. I tried to speak, say anything, but my breath seemed caught in my chest. The worst part, though, was his expression. He looked bored.

At some point I felt hands gripping me and I was pulled gently from the floor. It was a pair of tourists from New Zealand who had come over to see if I was alright. I mumbled something about vertigo, though the feeling had faded now. I looked around, but there was no sign of the scarred man. I looked again, and realised with mounting alarm that there was also no sign of Grant. I checked, but the terrace wasn't huge and there was nowhere for him to be hiding. I thought he must have taken the lift back down, but he wasn't in the lobby, or outside, or anywhere. He was gone.

I didn't realise my phone was dead until several hours into the search. When I finally charged it, I had dozens of missed calls from Grant and almost four hundred text messages. Most were too scrambled to read, but those that weren't were asking where I was. Where anybody was. Where the elevators were.

There was one picture that seemed to have come through without

too much corruption: it seemed to show the terrace, but where the barrier should have been was just a sheer drop, with the top of a ladder reaching up and over it. I couldn't make out the city below it. I tried to call his phone so many times, but whenever it actually connected, all I heard was the sound of rushing wind.

I know that man with the scar took my brother. I don't know how he took him, or where, but I know he's gone. I haven't seen either of them since, and I don't think I will. It never felt like I was what he wanted. I really hope Grant is dead. Because, if not, I have a horrible feeling deep inside that he's still on that ladder.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Michael Crew. The man with the lightning scar. A fractal pattern burned into his flesh, chased by the manifestation of that pattern and then jumped out a window. So what is he now?

It strikes me that whenever a person gains any sort of power from these books, often they change, not just their actions, but who they are. It almost seems as though the power uses them, rather than the other way round. Did Leitner's book do something to Michael Crew? Others who encountered it reported similar feelings of vertigo to those reported by Mr. Walker, but it also puts me in mind of the fate of Robert Kelly, the skydiver who fell for far longer than he…

[Door opens]

Hello? Basira, what are you doing here? I thought…

BASIRA

Here.

[Sound of a box hitting a table]

ARCHIVIST

Are those the tapes?

BASIRA

As many of them as I could get.

ARCHIVIST

I don’t understand. You said we were done.

BASIRA

[Sound of exasperation]

They’re covering it up. Altman’s death. Saying he was dirty. That he got stabbed in a botched drug deal.

ARCHIVIST

Wait. So the operation you went on…

BASIRA

Doesn't exist. I mean, I didn't know Leo well, but… it's not right. And they seemed happy enough to get me out the door.

ARCHIVIST

I still don't understand why this leads to me getting the tapes. I mean, not that I'm ungrateful.

BASIRA

Well, they're sure as hell not going to solve Gertrude's murder, so you might as well have them. Before… I don't know, maybe I still had enough police in me not to just steal from Evidence, but now…

ARCHIVIST

They've rather lost your loyalty. I thought they were watching you?

BASIRA

No, not since the Brodie op. Everyone's been too busy. Daisy knows, and she's fine with it. There shouldn't be any problem until next inventory, and even then it's only if they can be bothered with the sectioned stuff. You should be in the clear.

ARCHIVIST

I… I don't know how to thank you.

BASIRA

Well, if I never see you again, or hear about any of this… that'll be thanks enough. Take care.

[Door closes]

ARCHIVIST

Right. I wonder where to start…

[CLICK]

MAG076 – The Smell of Blood

Statement #0171302

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Say your piece, but please make it quick. I have more pressing business.

MELANIE

Come on, I thought we were past that.

ARCHIVIST

Past what?

MELANIE

The attitude. I know I was kind of snotty when I first came in, but… come on, you were no better. I can admit I misjudged this place. Can you at least give me a chance?

ARCHIVIST

Fine. I'm sorry. I'm glad your opinion of us has changed.

MELANIE

My opinion of your Institute. I still think you're a pompous ass.

ARCHIVIST

Well, this 'pompous ass' has some very urgent work to do, so if your statement is just going to be insults, you can go back to the damn library.

MELANIE

It's not. Look, I… I think I've found something.

ARCHIVIST

About, what was it? Grey ladies?

MELANIE

No… well, sort of, I suppose… um, but that's just it. Grey ladies are just the beginning. They're the safe ones, I think. There are others.

ARCHIVIST

More 'active' ghosts?

MELANIE

Yes.

[Sound of cloth rustling]

ARCHIVIST

Oh good lord. Are you okay?

MELANIE

Yes, it's not as bad as it looks.

ARCHIVIST

What did that? When?

MELANIE

Just before I came in last time. And, er, best I can tell it was a 1940s surgical scalpel.

ARCHIVIST

A scalpel?

MELANIE

So, can I make my statement now?

ARCHIVIST

I think that might be for the best. Statement of Melanie King, regarding her further researches into…

MELANIE

I'm just calling them war ghosts.

ARCHIVIST

Recorded direct from subject, 13th February, 2017. Statement begins.

MELANIE

Ghost Hunt UK struggled after Aldershot. Sarah Baldwin disappeared. I spent a while trying to track her down but nothing led anywhere. I'm sure you found the same. The thing is, even though her peeling and stapling her own skin was the weirdest part of what I saw, it wasn't what I got really hung up on. Fact is, there was a presence in that place. A genuine, unseen presence that physically attacked her. I've got no real reference point for who or what Sarah Baldwin might be, but I sure as hell know what a ghost is and how to look into one.

The others were dealing with their own stuff. We struggled through another year, but it wasn't the same. Toni was the worst. She just got harder and harder to pin down for shoots, and then I struggled to reach her by phone or email. When she moved down to Bristol in March, she didn't even tell me. I had to hear it from Pete; in the exact same call he said that he was thinking about leaving the team as well. I think that's kind of why I came to you guys. I knew it was what happened at the CMH that was breaking us apart, but I couldn't actually talk to them about it. Then Andy decided to take what he called "a bit of a holiday" from the show, and I wasn't sure if he was coming back. If he did, I thought maybe we could find a new team and keep the show going. But he didn't. As far as Ghost

Hunt UK is concerned, he's still on holiday, and it's just me.

I actually went back to the Cambridge Military Hospital. It was being torn down, but I hopped the fence after dark and just waited. There was nothing. Just dust and rubble and silence. If I closed my eyes I could trick myself into thinking that the wind was some sort of howl of pain, but that's all it was, really. The wind. So I started looking into similar buildings, military hospitals specifically, but anywhere with a reputation for being haunted and connected to historical conflicts.

It was then that I started noticing something about the paranormal investigator community. We all look in the same places. There's a surprisingly small number of hauntings and cryptids that we all, sort of, swap between, repeating each other's research and coming to similar conclusions. That's why so many of us tend to go over to America. It's so much bigger that there's a lot more supposedly haunted locations on the circuit. Even then, it's not as many as you think. I mean, we get plenty of tips from the public about other stuff – they don't all come to see you, you know – but if they're not reporting something that we're already at least a bit familiar with, we tend to dismiss them out of hand. I used to assume this was to protect us from drunks and weirdos who ate the wrong kind of mushroom. I don't think that's it, though. I think it's to protect us from the stuff that might be real. Make sure we only go looking after encounters that others have already confirmed as safe. I mean, I don't know what it was about Sarah Baldwin that mixed so badly with the presence in the CMH, but that was the first I'd ever heard

of a significant encounter there. Somewhere, somehow, the community had deemed it as not dangerous. Asbestos notwithstanding.

So the more I looked, the more I realised that there was this huge list of places that my colleagues steered completely clear of without even realising it, and a handful of stories to go with them. It wasn't much, but it was a start. Even back then, I could feel all my old friends starting to distance themselves from me. Like they sensed I was crossing some unspoken line about what we were allowed to investigate. Everyone had a story about the friend who'd gone to the wrong place alone and disappeared or had quit the paranormal scene without explanation. I'd heard them all before, but now they weren't just pub chatter spook stories, they were not-so-subtle warnings about straying from the path. I couldn't go back, though. It was like once I had seen that there was a path to stray from, I couldn't unsee it. And I couldn't ignore the call from the woods all around. I stopped asking the others for help, and I kept my research to myself. I talked to them less and less. By the time I was arrested, I think a lot of them had already given up on me.

I'd been looking into a bunch of online stuff, the forums and the sites without the right sort of reputation for most of my lot. The sort of places with twenty made-up ghost stories for every one that might have some meat to it. After a while, you start to get a feel for the ones that are real or, at least, that the writer thinks are real. They tend to be the messy ones. The ones that don't really have any sense or resolution, no narrative flow. Where there isn't even a

guess at an explanation, and often you end up just thinking, “Is that it?”

There was one, though, that caught my eye. It was some anonymous worker at the C.F. Booth scrap metal and recycling yard. If you haven’t heard of it, it’s in Rotherham, and it’s one of the biggest train graveyards in the UK.

The guy said he worked there scrapping trains, but there was one metal rail car that had been there since he got the job, and it never seemed to be on the queue for recycling. He’d asked his supervisor, but they just shrugged and told him if it wasn’t queued it didn’t get scrapped, and he couldn’t get a straight answer out of anybody as to why it had just been sat there for years. He said it was old, like 1950s old, or even earlier maybe. More than that, he said that anytime he passed it while working late, he got a really strong, metallic odour that cut through all the other smells of the junkyard. He said he’d never been inside the carriage, but that it smelled like old blood.

The same post was on a couple of different forums, and each time told slightly differently. It wasn’t copy-pasted, and it seemed like the posts had been made over the course of a couple of years. There was nothing really to separate it from the hundreds of horror story liars that surrounded it, but it stuck with me. It kept playing on my mind, something about the way he had described the old rolling stock felt real to me. So I decided to check it out.

I have family up in Sheffield that I hadn’t seen in way too long, so I

made arrangements to go and stay with them for a week. I figured it wouldn't be too hard to head out and check the yard at night, since Rotherham's only a few miles away. I was right about how easy it was to get there, but not about getting in. I always forget how big a target places like that are for thieves, and how hard they work to keep them out. High walls, sturdy gates and security guards all stood between me and this supposedly haunted train.

I should have turned back, really, but by then I was kind of obsessed with finding anything to reassure me that I hadn't been seeing things back in Aldershot.

ARCHIVIST

I think I understand the feeling.

MELANIE

I'm sure you do.

I got over the wall on my third night of watching. I'd managed to figure out enough about how the cameras and security guards covered the place that I could take a full minute to get over quietly. The forum poster whose lead I was following hadn't given much away about his own identity, but he had been very detailed in describing what I was looking for. An almost featureless steel boxcar, with a slightly curved roof, large windowless sliding door, and a few flecks of olive green paint still visible.

Even so, finding it was tricky. There was almost no light inside the

yard except for the security lights that I was trying not to trip. I had brought a torch of course, but I was reluctant to turn it on in case I was spotted. After about ten minutes, I began to realise that my eyes weren't actually going to be the best way to find it. Because there, on the wind, was the smell of blood. It was faint at first, but as I felt my way past old, discarded trains, it got stronger. My eyes had adjusted now, and I could see the rusted ancient skeletons of freight and passenger cars. They stood empty and still, silhouetted against that dull orange of a cloudy sky that glowed with light pollution. As I got closer I started to get jumpy, and I swear more than once I saw figures sat in the broken windows of those old trains. They were never there when I looked again.

Finally I saw it, the stark, angular shape clear even in the dark. It was far enough from the security stations that I finally dared to turn on my torch. The light hit the dull steel, casting long shadows into its crevices, and it somehow seemed heavier than it should have been. It was old, really old, but there was no rust on its edges. The smell of blood was almost choking.

I began to walk towards the large sliding door, but as I did so my torchlight caught on something tucked in the corner of the panelling. It seemed to be a serial number, stencilled in black paint. It was clear and legible, despite its age, and surrounded by patches of still-unpeeled green paint. The colour of it made me think of the army. I took a few seconds to jot it down for checking later, then reached up and slid the large metal door to the side, shining my light inside.

At first it still seemed dark, and I couldn't see much. My light hit the opposite wall, but it was the same featureless steel as the outside. Then my torch beam drifted downwards, and I caught sight of the thick red stream dripping from the now-open side of the car. The floor of the carriage was about chest height for me, and as I looked I could see it was streaked with trails of blood that led down to the doorway. I traced my light up and along the shallow red stream and it hit what looked like an old metal hospital gurney. The fabric that covered it was that same military green as outside, and the body that lay on it was covered in a white cotton bag, stained black near the bottom. It wasn't lying still, either, but it twitched and writhed as though in pain.

I wanted to run, but without warning a shape ran out of the darkness to my left. There was a glint of shining metal in its hand as it charged over to the twitching white body bag, and began to plunge the scalpel into it again and again and again. It looked like a man. He was maybe mid-twenties, dressed in army fatigues and wearing a white armband with a red cross on it. His eyes, though, they… they weren't human. I mean, they were, but everything in them that makes us people was gone. The only thing in those eyes was violence. Carnage.

ARCHIVIST

Blood.

MELANIE

Yeah… blood. I was so fixed on those eyes I didn't even notice him run at me. I was only when I felt the scalpel slice into my shoulder that I realised what was happening and thought to scream. Next thing I knew, I was being carried away by security guards. They were shouting at me, while I ranted at them about blood and ghosts. I only had a chance to look back at the carriage once. It was too dark inside to be sure, but I… I think it was empty.

They couldn't decide whether to call the police or the ambulance, so split the difference and called both. The cut was nasty, but not deep enough to do any real damage; as you saw, I'm getting quite a scar from it. Still, it meant that even though I was technically arrested, I got to go in the ambulance rather than the police car. The guys from the scrapyard told them I'd cut myself in the dark on a sharp piece of metal. I started screaming at them, trying to tell them what actually happened. That must have been when that dog-walker, or whoever the hell it was, started filming. I was actually a meme for a day or two.

You do know what that is, don't you?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I know what a meme is. You were saying?

MELANIE

Well, that's it, really. After I recovered they dropped the charges, and I came to you, looking to use your library. You see, I still had the serial number, and I looked up the carriage afterwards. It was

from World War II. The 11th US Army Hospital train, operating in the European theatre from August 1944. The train crew was actually commended for their service.

ARCHIVIST

But…?

MELANIE

It crashed in April 1945. Derailed, killed 5 crew and seriously injured 14 more. There weren't any patients on board at the time. At least, not officially. There was only one steel train car that avoided derailment.

ARCHIVIST

I see.

MELANIE

Exactly. There's not a lot more information on it, though, and I've no idea how it ended up in Rotherham. So I came here to dig a bit deeper.

ARCHIVIST

Really? Our… our library is extensive, but it's hardly focused on the Second World War.

MELANIE

No, but the most detailed description of the crash that I could find came from the report of a man called William W. Hay. And later in life William Hay…

ARCHIVIST

Became a noted occultist, whose memoirs and researches were only ever published in a heavily edited form. And we have unexpurgated copies.

MELANIE

Exactly.

ARCHIVIST

Did you find anything?

MELANIE

Plenty. He served on the 11th Hospital Train as engineer, and there was a lot he had to say about it. They even let me make a photocopy.

ARCHIVIST (READING)

> On the subject of savagery, I have myself seen the long-term effects upon the psyche of witnessing the violence men may inflict upon one another. A dulling of the senses is merely the first step, though one that few progress beyond. In more acute cases, there comes a strange mania, a fascination with the

> mechanisms of this violence, the tactility of injury and the sensations that accompany it. The smell of blood especially appears to incite in a certain sort of mind, numbed by the horrors of war, the urge to commit unspeakable violence. I saw it once in the eyes of a young medic near Merey, a thing so grotesque that I have some sympathy with those who decided to crash, rather than risk his rampage. But even that pales to insignificance compared to what I saw in the infirmary at Amritsar. Two dozen Ghurkhas tearing each other to pieces, consumed by the terrible butchery they had inflicted. Such things are not to be dwelt on, but serve to illustrate my proposition that violence, inflicted, received or even just witnessed, can not only deal injury to the body or the mind, but to the soul itself.

ARCHIVIST

I see. So does this mean…?

MELANIE

Yes. And I've got my plane to India already booked.

ARCHIVIST

Even after your experience with the hospital train? It sounds like this could be far more dangerous…

MELANIE

Oh thank you but I don't need your fake concern.

I've heard them talking upstairs. You know this obsession even better than I do. I just wanted to make my statement…

ARCHIVIST

In case you get murdered by ghosts.

MELANIE

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

I understand. Thank you, Melanie.

MELANIE

Sure. Where's Sasha, by the way? I wanted to say goodbye.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry?

MELANIE

Sasha. Your assistant. I haven't seen her in a while.

You didn't fire her, did you?

ARCHIVIST

I'm not sure I understand, she brought you down here.

MELANIE

Oh… No, is that another Sasha? Are you collecting them?

ARCHIVIST

No, no, there's just… there's just Sasha.

MELANIE

You know who I mean. Tall, long hair, glasses… She was here when I first came in. Back last April? We had a long conversation about haunted pubs.

ARCHIVIST

No, I… I remember. But that **is** Sasha.

MELANIE

Right, okay, um… are you trying to gaslight me or something?

ARCHIVIST

What? No!

MELANIE

Is this a joke to you?

ARCHIVIST

No! No… I… I…

MELANIE

Because I am not crazy. And that is **not** the same woman I met before!

ARCHIVIST

Yes it is! I mean… What?

MELANIE

There is something **very** wrong with you.

ARCHIVIST

No… what?

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

I… um… I haven't followed up on Melanie's statement. I just keep thinking about what she said about Sasha. She was so certain. I mean, it's Sasha. Obviously it's Sasha. But… something… There's more than one thing in the files that can trick you. I can't just ignore it. So many stories about things that aren't as they appear to

be. Why Melanie, though? If… Why…

It doesn't matter. I need to do more research. When Melanie came in, I was looking through the box of tapes Basira gave me, trying to decide where to start. Now I think… I think I have an idea.

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

MAG077 – The Kind Mother

Statement #9941509

[CLICK]

GERTRUDE

Case 9941509 – Lucy Cooper. Incident occurred in Draycott, Somerset, August 1994. Victim's name given as Rose Cooper. Statement given 15th of September 1994. Committed to tape 4th of November 1996. Gertrude Robinson recording.

GERTRUDE (STATEMENT)

There is a stranger claiming to be my mother. I don't know who she is. Everyone else says that she's my mother, and gives me looks of alarm when I tell them she's an impostor. I don't know what to do.

My mother and I have always had our differences. To be honest, it's only been in the last five years or so that we really began speaking again. She was always a strong-willed woman, never one to blunt her opinions, and throughout my childhood it gradually got worse. Nothing I ever did was quite good enough, and any hint of pride I might have taken in myself or my achievements was always undercut by some cutting little critique.

Even on those rare occasions that I succeeded at something highly

enough to actually warrant her praise, it was always appended with doubt. I remember when I was fifteen I came first in an inter-school athletics competition. I was two seconds ahead in the hundred metre sprint, and all she could say was, “Make sure being the best runner doesn’t distract you from your exams”.

It didn’t really come to a head until I got engaged to Laurence, though. We’d been dating on and off through university, and I’d sat through enough awkward family dinners to know that my mother didn’t like him, but her disapproval was nothing new, so I ignored it. When he proposed to me after our graduation, I’d assumed she would simply tolerate it as she had every other one of my decisions.

I was wrong. When I told her, she got angry. Not the chill, disapproving anger I was used to from, but a genuine shouting rage. She accused me of throwing my life away, told me I’d regret it, and that Laurence was good-for-nothing scum who’d drag me down and stop me achieving anything. I answered her in kind, and the argument that we had that night was the last time I saw her for almost ten years. I’d try to convince myself that our differences were just that: we were simply two very different people. But sometimes I worry that the reason we could never get on was that we were far too much alike.

For instance, we were both far too stubborn for our own good. Maybe that’s why I stayed with Laurence through two affairs, as if accepting that I’d made a mistake would be letting her win. In the end I only left him when he was jailed for embezzlement, eight years into our marriage. Even then, I didn’t want to speak to her.

Didn't want to tell her she'd been right. It wasn't until my father had his accident that I finally decided to try and make amends.

My father is a gentle man. To this day I couldn't really tell you anything about his thoughts or opinions on anything, as they were invariably bulldozed by my mother. He was a benign, ineffectual presence, always in the shadow. For all that, I did love him; so when he fell from a ladder and ended up in a wheelchair, I made the decision to try and reconnect with my parents.

It wasn't easy. Beyond the greying of her hair, my mother hadn't changed, and the reconciliation I'd hoped for never really came. I spent my visits biting my tongue, or getting into vicious fights whenever I wasn't able to. But I could always see on my father's face how much he liked to see me, how happy he was to have our small family together again, so I persevered. I think she saw it too, to be honest, and whenever he wheeled himself painfully into the room, she would try her best not to antagonise me. After a while we came to an uneasy peace.

There were practical issues as well. They'd retired to the small village of Draycott in the Somerset countryside, and as I lived in London and didn't have a car, it was two trains and a long bus ride anytime I wanted to see them. But I made the effort.

I even conceived a reason to go more often – I've been doing some freelance work this summer for the British Library, recording and compiling oral histories on various topics, and it so happened that during her time as an academic, my mother had been something of

an authority on English and Welsh folklore. In fact, one of the reasons she always gave for retiring out there was how many myths and legends made their home in the area.

So I proposed that I make some recordings of her, telling and discussing them for the project. She agreed, though not before telling me how pointless the whole thing sounded, and over the last few months I saw them several times. My father was happy, the recordings I got were surprisingly usable, and everything seemed to be getting better.

Two weeks ago I went to see them, and someone else opened the door. Someone I didn't recognise. She wore my mother's clothes, but they shouldn't have fitted her. My mother is tall, rail thin and always keeps her hair cut short, but the woman who answered my knocking was shorter, rounded about the middle and wore her curly white hair down almost to her shoulders. I had definitely never seen her before.

I asked if my parents were home, and she laughed. It was a soft, joyful sound that was so unlike anything I expected to hear in that house that I had to take a step back to collect my thoughts. My father wheeled round the corner and shouted a greeting as though everything was perfectly normal. He moved up beside the plump old woman standing in the doorway and looked at me, smiling. The image made me feel queasy. I'm not even sure why, at this point I had no reason to think this person was anything other than a friend of my parents, but something wasn't right.

I asked where my mother was, and they both got very quiet. I repeated the question with more force, and my father looked up to this strange woman in confusion. She smiled sadly and stepped towards me, opening her arms as if to hug me, but I yelled at her to get back, demanding to see my mother. My father's face grew dark, and he told me that my joke wasn't funny. With the most force I'd ever heard from him, he told me that however angry I was, this wasn't the right way to deal with it. I looked back at this woman, standing there with open arms, and she smiled at me.

"Come, give your mother a hug," she said.

The hour or two after that are a bit of a blur. I have vague memories of being numbly taken through into the living room, sat on the sofa and handed a cup of tea. I tried to drink it as they talked on at me, but it was ice cold, so I must have been sitting there a long time. I nodded once or twice, I think. My dad clearly thought I was having some sort of breakdown, and was just talking about whatever came into his head in the hopes of calming me down. The woman who was not my mother just talked cheerily, as though there was nothing at all amiss.

She had a kind voice, and her words were warm and friendly. She was nothing like my mother, and I was very quickly becoming deeply afraid. Had she done something to my real mother, and somehow convinced my father she was her? It seemed a ridiculous thought. My father may have been disabled but his mind was still sharp, and he'd never showed any signs of the sort of dementia that would let a stranger pose as his wife. Was he her prisoner? Maybe,

but he didn't seem to be acting as though anything was wrong, and if that was the case why bother trying to convince me of so obvious a lie?

I excused myself, and moved quickly out towards the back garden. Neither of them made a move to stop me. I saw a phone near the back porch and grabbed it, intending to call the police, when something caught my eye. It was a series of photographs on the wall, showing our family in happier times. It had been there for as long as I'd been to the house, and likely a lot longer. I had spent a long time staring at it my first visit there, lost in pleasant nostalgia, remembering days at the beach or the trip we took to Hanover when I was eight.

But now, in every one of them there stood this new woman where my mother should have been. She looked younger in these pictures, just like my father, and across the dozen pictures on the wall I could see a timeline of this woman growing old alongside him. There was no way these photos could have been staged, and I could even see a small crease on the bottom corner of the Hanover picture. I remembered I'd sat on the pictures by accident on the journey home, bending the corner out of place. I'd got a nasty talking to after that, and certainly not from the kindly fraud currently putting the kettle on in the kitchen.

It didn't make any sense. It still doesn't make any sense. After dinner I insisted that we get out the photo albums, spouting some nonsense about catching up on memories. My father and the woman who was not my mother agreed readily enough, and so out

came the albums and I began to look through them. I must have looked at well over five hundred photographs that evening, and not a single one was out of place or failed to feature this stranger where my mother should have been.

As my turning of the pages became more and more frantic, I spotted a look on the face of this new mother. It was amused, almost mocking, and I became sure that she knew. Whoever this woman that called herself Rose Cooper was, she knew it was a lie as much as I did, and my confusion and fear delighted her.

For all that, though, I was at a complete loss to explain any of it. Every piece of photographic evidence I can find supported this woman's claim to be my mother. My father's memories agreed, as did the memories of the two neighbours I was able to talk to the following day – Tom Harrison and Joanne Fisher. Both of them told me that they'd known George and Rose Cooper since they'd moved in, and when I asked them to describe Rose, they said she was medium height with a kind, round face and long, curly white hair.

I even took a walk up to the Church of St. Peter's, where I knew my mother occasionally visited, to ask the vicar, a polite man named Neil Angus. He told me the same thing as the others, though he did ask after my mother's health. Apparently she'd had a bit of a fall the week before outside the church, and the vicar had come out to help after hearing her cry out. He turned a bit pale when he said this. I pressed him further, and he told me that, although she'd seemed fine when he had reached her, the scream was like nothing he'd ever heard.

I asked the woman who is not my mother about her ‘fall’ near the church. She looked me right in the eyes, smiled, and said it was nothing. She’d just had a “bit of a funny turn”.

That’s it, really. I left immediately and haven’t been back. I’ve never been a believer in the supernatural before, but it seems clear to me that something attacked my mother near St. Peter’s church, killed her and somehow replaced her completely. The only piece of evidence I can find is the recordings I’d made of her beforehand. The tapes still have her real voice on. I have a few, so you can have one for whatever tests you might want to do. I’m going to go back to my father and play him the others. Maybe it’ll jog a memory, or maybe he’ll try to have me put away. Either way, I have to try.

I used to think I hated my mother; I really did. But now I can’t stop listening to those tapes, now I know they’re the only way I’ll ever hear her voice again. All of them except the tape we recorded on the old myths of the fae, of changelings. I’m not ready to listen to that one yet.

GERTRUDE

Final comments: Unfortunately for Ms. Cooper’s attempts to convince her father, it appears George Cooper died of carbon monoxide poisoning from a gas leak two days after this statement was recorded, before her next visit. No other bodies were found, and there has been no sign of anyone identifying themselves as Rose Cooper since.

Based on the interactions and effects, I suspect this to be the creature that Adelard Dekker refers to as the “NotThem” in statement 9910607. If the pattern of behaviour is consistent with what he establishes, then further follow-up on this case is pointless: the thing has finished with the Cooper family, and will not be revisiting them. It rarely seems to stay in the same place or with the same people for long, though it’s hard to guess at its motives. Personally, I suspect it to be an aspect of The Stranger, though that’s entirely conjecture at this point.

What puzzles me more is why one or two people can always see through it. The sheer power that it must be able to call upon to be able to rewrite so much of reality, seemingly as a reflex, is staggering. So why does it always miss a few witnesses?

It is at least reassuring to know that magnetic tape seems to escape being overwritten, so if I get changed, you can be sure this is my real voice. Based on Dekker’s statement, it would seem Polaroids are also relatively stable. Beyond that, I find it comforting that this creature appears content to travel freely sowing random terror. I dread to think the damage it could inflict if it had a purpose.

I have destroyed the tape Ms. Cooper provided us as a precaution – I have no interest in attracting this thing’s attention.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

I found this tape while rifling through the boxes Basira provided me. It was labelled “Changeling / Imposter,” and given Melanie’s outburst last week, I thought it a prudent place to start listening. It is, uh…

The tapes that went missing after the Prentiss attack all had Sasha’s voice on them. I hadn’t put it together until listening to this. I don’t know what this… I know exactly what this means. But I don’t know what to do about it. I can’t tell the others. Even if I could get them to believe me, they’d find out about Gertrude’s tapes. I can’t risk that. I need to deal with this myself. And that means I need more information on this thing. How it works. How it k…

I need to know how to stop it. I’m going to start by tracking down the statement by this “Adelard Dekker”. I… I think the statements from the Nineties are marginally more organised now. If it’s here, if Sasha… I’m going to find out how to kill it.

[CLICK]

MAG078 – Distant Cousin

Statement #0011206

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

I… er…

We… we didn't…

Statement of Lawrence Moore. Regarding something that was not his cousin. Original statement given June 12th, 2001. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I used to have a cousin. His name was Carl. We weren't close. I saw him plenty growing up – his family lived in Peterborough and mine lived in Leicester, so it wasn't too far. We'd go over occasionally, or we'd all be left together at our grandmothers if our parents were doing something together. They never came over to our house, though; at least I don't remember them doing so. My memories of childhood are a bit hazy, so I can't be completely sure. Putting it down on paper now, though, I realise that, given how close we

lived, it's odd that we didn't see each other more. I wonder how well our parents really got on. Thinking about it, I suppose they never had much in common.

Either way we got on fine, me and Carl. I think. I was a few years younger than him, and when you're a kid that makes a lot of difference. I suspect he saw me as a bit of an annoyance, a bit of a tag-along, but I don't remember us ever getting into fights or anything like that. We'd spend most of the time exploring my grandmother's wide country garden, or sitting awkwardly together pretending to do something while our parents talked about whatever grown-up topics needed their attention.

Since I grew up and moved out, though, I hardly ever saw Carl. A family dinner at Christmas some years or the occasional big family birthday, but if you totalled up all the hours we spent together since I turned eighteen, I doubt we'd be very far into double digits. And if you only count the time we'd actually spent talking to each other… I'm not sure you could even piece together a full hour.

It didn't really bother me, and it certainly didn't bother him. I remember, shortly after I moved down to London I actually bumped into him shopping in Covent Garden. Turned out he lived about twenty minutes bus ride from me. I half-heartedly suggested we should go for a drink or hang out or something. And he said, "Yeah", in a flat tone that told me he had absolutely no interest whatsoever in doing so.

I wonder if I ever did anything as a child to set him against me? Or

in that tiny sliver of time we actually interacted as adults. It's weird to think about people who knew you as a child. You change so much, and when you talk to them again, they're not talking to you. They're talking to someone else, someone you used to be. The person they think they're seeing has been dead for years, but they didn't see the change. They're looking at a complete stranger, and they have no idea.

I went to my brother's wedding recently, and there was something pretending to be my cousin Carl. Adam, my brother, had always gotten along slightly better with him than I had, being closer in age, and during the ceremony I had been surprised not to see Carl among the guests. It was only later, at the reception, when I was being introduced to a number of my brother's friends I'd never met before, that I offered my hand to a dark-haired stranger and asked his name. He looked at me for a long, off-putting second as a wide smile crept across his face. "I know it's been a long time, Lawrence," he said, "but surely you haven't forgotten your cousin Carl?"

What are you supposed to say to that? I just sort of stammered and wandered off. I didn't realise exactly what was happening until I asked my brother who the stranger was, and he gave me a puzzled look and told me, yes, that was Carl, my cousin. I assumed he must be playing some sort of joke, but the whole thing had really kind of unsettled me, so I asked my father, and he said the same thing. Now, my father is not somebody who jokes. He's never been one for humour and I can count on one hand the number of times I've ever

heard him properly laugh. There was no way he would play along in any sort of prank Adam might try to arrange. I looked over, and the person who claimed to be my cousin was staring at me, smiling wide enough to show off rows of yellow-stained teeth.

I could feel panic beginning to rise in my chest, and I started asking everyone who might know Carl, and all of them told me the same thing. When my aunt gave me a withering glare for asking who her son was, I had to leave. I just walked out of the hall, got in my car and drove back to London. I don't drink, so it definitely wasn't that. I thought maybe I was having some sort of dissociative episode. That must have been it. I'd been under a lot of stress at work, and my own marriage had recently ended, so perhaps that had affected me more than I thought. Maybe it had done something to my memory. I even managed to half-convince myself that if I was having a nervous breakdown and all that meant was I misremembered a cousin I never see, I'd gotten off quite lightly.

But I couldn't let it go. It nagged at me. As I lay awake in my too-empty bed, it twisted in my mind. I wasn't just remembering Carl wrong. I did not know the person who was using his name. It wasn't Carl. It just wasn't.

I was signed off work at the time, and mostly spent my days just kicking around the house, but a about a week after the wedding it occurred to me that, when my grandmother passed away a few years before, my parents had asked me to go through her old photos, see which ones we might like to keep. I'd taken them, but had never actually gotten around to going through them, and they

should still be in the loft. Not having anything better to do, and still a little bit off-balance after Adam's wedding, I pulled down the ladder, and went to fetch them.

The attic space was warm and dry, with that thin film of dust in the air that isn't quite enough to set you coughing but leaves your mouth feeling dry and sticky. I pushed away a few plastic crates of old comics, until I found the brittle cardboard box that held the pictures. My grandmother had loved her camera, and I remember her shelves were always full of tiny canisters of film, but it wasn't until I started to look through them that I realised quite how many pictures she'd actually taken.

There were hundreds, maybe thousands, in there, and going through them I watched myself grow from a squash-faced toddler to a chubby little boy and a spotty, scowling teenager. And alongside me was my brother Adam, and another child, who I did not recognise, but whose dark hair seemed to match the man I had met at the wedding.

By the end, my whole body was shaking. Not because of all those pictures of a strange child playing in the garden with us, but because of the two – only two – pictures I found of Carl. The Carl I remembered, with light brown hair cut short and an almost piggish nose. The second of those photos looked like it had only been taken moments after a different picture of us playing tag, but that one showed the other child where Carl should have been. Where I knew he had been. I stared at those photographs for what must have been an hour or more, completely unable to make any sense of what I

was looking at.

At some point, I was roused by a knock on the front door. It wasn't hard, or impatient, just a light series of taps. As though whoever was on the other side had no doubt that was in, and was politely trying to attract my attention. I put the pictures back quickly, and hurried down to answer it.

Standing on the other side was my new cousin Carl. He smiled that same yellow smile, and said that he'd been sad to see me leave Adam's wedding so soon, and that since we lived so close together, it seemed rude not to drop by. I tried to tell him to leave, to demand to know where Carl was, but my heart was beating so fast and I was just too scared. He walked calmly past me, into the house, and I closed the door behind him.

What followed was the longest afternoon of my life. I sat in an armchair and he took the sofa opposite, sitting stiffly in a way that seemed far too still. Neither of us said a word. He just stared at me, smile still wide and something twinkling in his eyes that might have been amusement. Or triumph. He showed no desire to make any sort of conversation, and I was too terrified to say anything at all.

I just kept thinking, what had this man done to Carl, and could he do it to me? I tried to look at him, to really look, but the more I attempted to focus on him properly, the more my eyes seemed to slide off him. Like one of those optical illusions that only comes into focus when you're looking at a different part of the picture.

At one point, it almost seemed like his neck was too long, but when I looked again it was normal. The only two things I knew for sure was that I had never been as scared as I was just then, and that I did not know this man.

When evening finally came, he stood up. He nodded at me and told me how much he had enjoyed his visit. “We must do this again,” he said, “and soon.” Then he left. I stayed sat in that chair and I cried.

It was full dark when I was broken out of my despair by another knock on the door. This one was harsh and jarring, and I could hear the doorframe rattle slightly at the impact. Standing there was another man I’d never seen before. He was black, dressed in a crisp white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and a thin necktie.

For a moment, I had the idea he might be a Jehovah’s Witness, but one look at his face dispelled that idea immediately. It was hard and stern, set in look of determination, and his short hair was iron grey. He was very thin, with aging skin stretched tight over wiry, corded muscle, and though he was slightly shorter than I was, it seemed like he towered over me. He asked if I knew the man who had left my house earlier that evening.

I laughed at that; a harsh laugh that surprised even me. I said I did not know him, no matter how many pictures might tell me I did. At this, the old man’s eyes lit up with excitement, and I took an involuntary step back. If he noticed, he didn’t show it, walking past me into the house and ordering me to get any photos that hadn’t changed. I don’t know if it was the certainty in his voice or my own

feeling of helplessness, but it didn't even occur to me not to do what he said.

I returned from the loft with the box of photographs to find him sat on the sofa, exactly where my impostor cousin had sat not two hours before, and I finally got up the courage to ask him who he was. He told me his name was Adelard Dekker, and that he was an exorcist, of sorts. I asked him if he thought my cousin was somehow possessed, but he was already looking through the box, and ignored me. He pulled out the same two photographs I had found, the ones that hadn't changed, and his mouth twisted into a wry smile.

He told me to follow him, and I did. We walked over to an unmarked blue Transit van parked on the other side of the road, and he opened the back doors. Inside was a large wooden box with a hinged lid.

The man who called himself Adelard Dekker climbed in and picked up the back of it, commanding me to take the other end. I did, and together we carried it into my house. It was heavy and barely fit through the front door, but any objections I might have had were silenced by one look from Dekker. We placed it down in the middle of the living room, and I instinctively went to lift the lid. I caught a brief glimpse of dark, varnished wood before he slammed it down, almost trapping my hand, and shook his head once. "It's not for you," he said.

Then he instructed me to go to my bedroom, and not to leave until he told me it was safe. I did protest at that, and I asked him how my

locking myself upstairs would help save Carl. There was no sympathy in his voice when he told me my cousin was dead, that nothing would bring him back, and that my best chance to not join him was to stay in the bedroom until everything was over. He did not seem inclined to tell me what he meant by “everything”.

So I did what he said. I suppose I could have called the police, but this strange, old man spoke with such certainty that I felt like following his instructions was the only hope I had. I lay in my bed and I tried to sleep. I did, though not well. The image of this new Carl kept intruding in my dreams and jolting me awake. The sun came up, and there was no word from Dekker, so I stayed there, waiting for something to happen, though I had no idea what. I lay in bed all morning and then into the afternoon.

Finally, at about three o’clock, I heard the soft knock at the door. It was the exact same knock at the exact same time, and I felt my body seize up with fear. There was the sound of the door opening, but nothing else. I just lay there, straining my ears to hear any sound. The air grew close and heavy, like a thunderstorm about to break, but still I heard nothing. Ten minutes passed. Then an hour. And then the air was split by the most unnatural scream I have ever heard. I cannot even begin to describe it, except to say that there was nothing in it but the purest rage.

Panic surged through me. I had to get out of that house. I threw open the bedroom door and charged down the stairs towards the front. And as I did so, I passed by the living room, and I instinctively turned my head to see inside.

Adelard Dekker stood in the corner. He was straight and motionless, his lips moving rapidly, though no sound came out of them. In the centre of the room, next to the empty box, stood a table carved from dark wood and wrapped all over with a sprawling, intricate pattern. And in front of that table was the thing that had said it was my cousin. It was long and thin, the tops of it bent against the ceiling and its stick-like limbs flailed from too many joints and elbows. Wrapped around it were thick strands of what I think was spider's web, stretching back into the table, which I now saw pulsed along its carved channels with a sickly light. The face at the top of that gangly frame was like nothing on earth.

That was all I saw, because the second after I had taken it in, I was out of the door and down the street, running as fast as I could away from that house. I kept running until I collapsed, and lay there on the street until a passer-by asked if I needed help.

I didn't return to my house until the next morning. Dekker's blue van was gone, and in its place was another one, dirty white. There was something printed on the side, but I couldn't make it out under the grime. I watched two men in overalls carry that same box out of my house, load it up, and drive away. That was about two months ago, and it was the last time I saw them, the table, Adelard Dekker, or the thing that wasn't my cousin.

My aunt and uncle have reported Carl missing. The police did come round and asked me if I knew anything but I told them nothing. I just said we weren't very close.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

I found this in the folder marked 9910602, where Gertrude's tape had indicated I would find the statement of Dekker himself. There is nothing else in there, but I think it tells me what I need to know. This thing, this "Not Sasha", it's tied to the table. It…

I found the tapes.

[TAPE NOISES]

SASHA (RECORDING)

I thought it was pronounced "Kah-lee-o-pee?

ARCHIVIST

They were in her desk. Well hidden, but… If I'd been a bit more thorough, if I…

[TAPE NOISES]

SASHA (RECORDING)

It's just a scratch, John. I'll be fine. Can we begin?

ARCHIVIST

Was there anything I could have done? Could I have…

[TAPE NOISES]

SASHA (RECORDING)

Hello? I see you. Show yourself.

[TAPE NOISES]

NOT!SASHA (RECORDING)

Hello?

[TAPE NOISES]

I see you.

[TAPE NOISES]

I see you.

ARCHIVIST

And now I see you.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

TIM

You wanted to see us.

MARTIN

Are you ok? You look awful.

ARCHIVIST

I'm… I'm coming down with something, I think.

Listen, you should take the rest of the day off.

Tomorrow as well.

MARTIN

Are you sure you –

ARCHIVIST

Don't want to infect anyone else. Best you stay home.

TIM

Wouldn't it make more sense if you went home, then?

MARTIN

Are you feverish? We should probably get you to a doctor. Look, there's a walk-in centre nearby I can –

ARCHIVIST

No. No, I have things I still need to take care of here.

And, besides, I know you've both been under a lot of… pressure lately. I think we could all do with a bit of break.

MARTIN

Well… well, yeah but…

ARCHIVIST

I know, I know, a lot of it's been because of me. Most of it. I'm sorry. Tim, I know things have been… fraught.

TIM

I guess that's a word for it.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, well, I think some time off could only help.

TIM

Because you're ill.

ARCHIVIST

Yes…. Yes. And I'm… I'm sorry. About everything.

MARTIN

J-John… look, are you –

TIM

Ok. Right you are, John. We'll be going.

MARTIN

Wait, what?

TIM

Come on, Martin. We could do with a break. Er… do you need us to tell Sasha?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, no, no. I'll be seeing her later.

MARTIN (BACKGROUND)

Tim… Wait…

TIM

Great. See you Monday.

MARTIN (BACKGROUND)

No, no…

ARCHIVIST

Yes, see you then.

MARTIN

Hang on, Tim, we should probably –

[DOOR CLOSES]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

[Whispered] It is remarkably easy to buy an axe in Central London. Harder to sneak it into Artefact Storage, but not impossible. I don't know if destroying this is going to kill that thing… but I am damn sure it's going to hurt.

[NOISE OF AXE HITTING & SPLINTERING WOOD AND THE GRUNTS OF THE ARCHIVIST AS A STRANGE MUSIC BEGINS TO BUILD AND INTENSIFY]

[SOUND OF SHATTERING WOOD AND THE STRANGE MUSIC DISAPPEARS]

Hollow. Just cobwebs and dust.

[FAMILIAR EERIE LAUGHTER]

MICHAEL

That was very stupid.

ARCHIVIST

What do you want?

MICHAEL

There's no other way out of this room, you know.

ARCHIVIST

What?

MICHAEL

You don't have time to escape before they get here.

ARCHIVIST

The… the… the "Not Sasha"? No, but the table…

MICHAEL

Was binding it quite effectively.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Oh no.

MICHAEL

Even with all the protections you have on, I doubt you can survive them now.

[IN THE BACKGROUND, THE ARCHIVIST IS WORRIEDLY MUTTERING ‘NO’ OVER AND OVER]

NOT!SASHA

[Heavily distorted, distant] Jooooohhhnnnn….

ARCHIVIST

Er… I…

[SOUND OF A CREAKY DOOR OPENING]

MICHAEL

You. Need. A door.

ARCHIVIST

NO. No, I… I just… I need…

[DISTORTED VOICE FROM THE NOT!SASHA CALLING OUT HIS NAME AGAIN]

ARCHIVIST

Shit!

[MICHAEL LAUGHS AND LAUGHS]

[STRANGE SOUND ALMOST LIKE SOMETHING ROARING OPEN

AS MICHAEL'S LAUGH ECHOES]

[CLICK]

MAG079 – Hide and Seek

Statement #0170216–A

[CLICK]

MARTIN

Streets. By Martin K. Blackwood.

The streets are hard in London.

Paved in old secrets, the hot smell after the rains.

The threads of people walking, living, lovi–

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS]

MARTIN

You're sure about this? He did tell us to go home…

TIM

Yeah, and then he said, "Sorry for everything". Something's up.

MARTIN

You don't think he's going to… y'know…

TIM

I don't know. But he's going to do **something**, and it's going to be bad. And I don't mean like 'sneaking a cigarette' bad. Like properly bad.

MARTIN

So we need to help him?

TIM

We need to **stop** him.

MARTIN

And… we needed my tape recorder because…

TIM

Because something tells me we're going to need evidence by the end of today. I don't want to wind up in court without something to back me up.

MARTIN

Court?

TIM

Yeah. Er, tribunal if we're lucky, inquest if we're not.

MARTIN

You did use a new tape, didn't you?

TIM

Yeah, I took one off the pile.

MARTIN

Was it blank or… Tim?

TIM

It was blank.

MARTIN

He's never going to speak to us again.

TIM

Don't get my hopes up.

[DOOR OPENS]

MARTIN

John?

TIM

Aaaaaand he's gone. Thought so.

MARTIN

You don't think he's going to…

TIM

I don't know, Martin! I think he's going fully off the deep end, is what I think. If he hasn't already.

[DOOR CLOSES]

[FOOTSTEPS]

MARTIN

Look, I know you don't like him…

TIM

Got that, did you?

MARTIN

But I'm not going to help you get him fired.

TIM

Martin! What do you think is happening here? This isn't office politics. It's not like he's had one too many at the Christmas party and started ranting about the Greeks. Whatever is happening here it's literally supernatural.

MARTIN

Really? Isn't that a little… y'know?

TIM

No, it isn't "a little y'know". There is something in this place, and it's messing up our heads. It watches us all the time. It stops me quitting. I'm pretty sure it would stop Elias firing John even if he decided to try actually running the place for once.

MARTIN

You're sure you don't just want to stay?

TIM

I'm sure.

MARTIN

But, like, deep down –

TIM

No.

MARTIN

Oh.

…

So you really think the Institute is, what, haunted?

TIM

I used to. Now I think it's worse.

MARTIN

Worse how?

[CRASH OF DOOR BREAKING]

NOT!SASHA

[Heavily distorted] Jooooohhhn!

[SOUNDS OF TIM & MARTIN BEING SURPRISED]

TIM

Oh god! What the hell was that?!

MARTIN (BACKGROUND)

Oh no nononononono!

[A ROAR, SOUNDS OF FRANTIC BREATHING, RUNNING FOOTSTEPS AND SCUTTLING MOVEMENT]

[TRAPDOOR OPENS]

[RAPID, SINISTER SCUTTLING MOVEMENT RECEDES]

[SILENCE, AS TIM AND MARTIN TRY TO REGAIN THEIR BREATH]

TIM

What the hell was that?

MARTIN

It… er… It looked… It kinda looked…

TIM

Oh don't say it.

MARTIN

It did, though, didn't it?

TIM

That wasn't Sasha.

MARTIN

No. No, no, it wasn't.

You don't… you don't think –

TIM

He told her to go home. Like us!

MARTIN

Yeah.

TIM

And she did.

MARTIN

Yeah.

…

It went into the tunnels.

TIM

Nope. No. Not happening.

MARTIN

We can’t just leave him.

TIM

Yeah, we can.

MARTIN

I’m going.

[FOOTSTEPS]

TIM

Martin!

Mar… I'm not coming down there with…

Damn it. Fine.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Damn. Damn damn damn damn DAMN!

[HAND SLAPS STONE]

I… I took Michael's door. It was that or face Sa… the thing that was pretending to be Sasha. It opened into the tunnels. The tunnels. Not exactly the escape I was hoping for. I'm hardly surprised, must be its idea of a joke. Still, it is… it is a head start I suppose. I have no idea where in the tunnels I am. Or how far down.

At least it didn't leave me trapped in some corridor hellmaze… a different corridor hellmaze, at least.

So I suppose I just… I just wait for now. I don't think it's going to just give up, and I can't risk attracting its attention. It might already be down here with me. Just stay quiet.

Stay hidden.

…

God, I'm an idiot. Smash the table, kill the monster, stupid! Lazy, sloppy assumption. Of course the table was binding it. The table is webs and spiders. Spiders are something else. They don't help each other, they oppose, they… they weaken. It was caught in a web, and I… All the pieces were there. And I just… I couldn't see it.

…

I don't know how much tape I have left. I'm going to stop recording. To conserve it. If –

NOT!SASHA

[DISTANT] Jooooohhhnnnn…

ARCHIVIST

Oh Christ.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

MARTIN

What now? We need to hurry.

TIM

Shhh!

…

I thought I heard something up ahead.

MARTIN

I didn't hear anything. Why, do you think it was the Sasha-thing?

TIM

Will you shut up about that. It wasn't anything like her.

MARTIN

No, I know, but I mean… like, if you really stretched her out…

TIM

We're never going to find him down here.

MARTIN

So go get some help.

TIM

Er… Elias is probably still in his office.

MARTIN

I thought you said he was a waste of a suit.

TIM

Yeah, well he's better than nothing.

MARTIN

If you want to go, I understand.

TIM

I… I'm not just going to leave you down here.

MARTIN

You were all about quitting.

TIM

Oh, for God's sake, this isn't about you.

MARTIN

It never is.

TIM

Alright, fine. Fine. What do **you** want? What's **your** light at the end of these spooky damn tunnels? And don't say 'everyone happy forever', because that's not happening.

…

Well?

MARTIN

I don't know. I don't know! I want to find out what's going on. I want to save John. I want everyone to be fine, and, you know what? If we were all happy that wouldn't actually **be** the end of the world.

TIM

Fine.

MARTIN

No, no it's not "fine". You've been going on and on and on about how alone you feel because John's not taking your feelings into account while he's having his breakdown, but you're just doing the same thing. We've all been going through this, Tim, but you're the only one who's been running away.

TIM

Okay, okay. Look, let's keep going. There's nobody here.

MICHAEL

Yes there is.

TIM

Stay back!

MICHAEL

No.

MARTIN

Who are you?

MICHAEL

I'm Michael. Did the Archivist not tell you about me?

MARTIN

No?

MICHAEL

Good. Surprises are better.

TIM

What are you doing down here?

MICHAEL

Probably watching the Archivist die. Maybe not. Either way is amusing. I… I think it's called 'a sport'.

TIM

What?

MICHAEL

I think I might also kill you. It would be easier than killing the

Archivist. None of you are protected down here.

MARTIN

No, no, now hang on…

MICHAEL

You are going to try and help him. And I want to see what happens without you there.

TIM

Martin…

MARTIN

No, no, okay, because there's two of us and there's one of you, okay. He's not killing anyone!

TIM

Martin, look at his hands!

MARTIN

Oh.

TIM

Go!

[SINISTER DOOR OPENS]

[FOOTSTEPS]

[MICHAEL LAUGHS]

[SINISTER DOOR SHUTS]

[HEAVY BREATHING]

[Distorted] Where the hell are we?

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[HEAVY BREATHING AND SOFTLY CREEPING FOOTSTEPS]

ARCHIVIST

I have no idea where I am. There were stairs. I, I, I kept going lower. No arrows pointing down, though, which is… good? I don't know. I found a weapon. Of sorts.

[RINGING OF A METAL PIPE AGAINST A WALL]

I don't know if it'll help. I mean, it's not going to help. I can't fight it with a pipe. I'm tired just carrying it. But it does make me feel a bit better, so… so that's something.

I keep thinking I might have gotten away, but I think it can sense me… uh, at least a bit. I can hide for now, I think, but I don't know for how long. I can't kill it. I heard the tape. It erased Sasha, just like that. Deleted her from the world. I just hope this tape works the same, that my voice remains intact. Even if I'm gone, even if it wears a face that people think is mine, pulls me apart, becomes me. Listen, it's not me! Whoever hears this: it is **not me.**

I don't even remember what she looks like. Even now that I know, now I've seen it twisted and… I still don't remember her. The only face I can picture is…

NOT!SASHA

[Distant] Jooooohhhhn… Jooooohhhhn… Come out, come out, wherever you are.

[SCARED BREATHING]

It's okay John; it's Sasha. Reliable old Sasha.

Nothing to be afraid of.

…

You seem stressed, John. You've been under a lot of pressure. You should talk about it. Have a real good chat. You like talking, don't you, John?

…

I'm going to wear you, John. I'm going to wear everything you are. Like you never existed. No-one will even know. And it will hurt. Oh, yes, it will hurt. It hurt Sasha.

ARCHIVIST

Shut up!

NOT!SASHA

[Close and distorted] There you are.

[HEAVY BREATHING AS IF RUNNING]

[WEIRD SCUTTLING MOVEMENT]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[Dialogue is very distorted until next CLICK]

TIM

Where the hell are we?

MARTIN

I don't know. I thought… I thought the door led further down.

TIM

I don't think we're under the Institute anymore.

MARTIN

What was that thing?

TIM

I'm trying not to think about it. It makes my head feel weird.

MARTIN

Well? Wh… which way do you think?

TIM

Er… Right. Let's go right.

MARTIN

[SIGH] Fine. I don't think this thing's working properly. It k-keeps making this weird noise.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[HEAVY BREATHING SLOWS]

NOT!SASHA

I'm glad we got a chance to run, John. It makes it so much more satisfying.

Do you have any idea how long I watched you? You and your little… acolytes. I **hated** it.

Let me tell **you** a story. You like stories; we can even call it a statement if you want.

Once upon a time there was a monster, but no one realised. Sometimes someone did and then they were scared, so that was good. But one day a nasty man came along. A nasty man who tricked the monster and wrapped it all in webs and tied it to a table.

So the monster got its friends to carry the table all around, and it still got to take faces and scare people. Then one day it was sent to the house of its enemy, which had the biggest eyes you ever did see. The monster was sent there to steal all its secrets, but it was sad because it couldn't scare anyone any more.

Then finally, after what seemed like forever, a stupid, arrogant, little man cut the webs and set the monster free. Free to kill and scare whoever it wanted.

So thank you. I did leave what clues I could but I never dared hope you would actually release me.

[MENACING SATISFIED LAUGHTER]

I must confess, though, I almost enjoyed watching you scurry around. Desperately missing the point. At least I knew what I was looking for. You really aren't even a shadow of your predecessor. You're nothing. Even I would make a better Archivist than you.

Maybe I will.

You'll miss the Unknowing, of course, but you wouldn't understand it anyway.

ARCHIVIST

[Whispering] I'm sorry. Martin, Tim… Sasha. I'm so sorry. I should have… I didn't… I'm sorry.

God, I'm so sorry.

NOT!SASHA

I wonder, if I wear you, will I really become the Archivist? Rob the eye of its pupil?

Probably not. Better to just kill you I think.

Yes. I think that would be best.

ARCHIVIST

[Whispering] Please forgive me. If you're still alive… if… if you hear this. Get as far away from the Magnus Institute –

[GASP]

NOT!SASHA

Found you.

ARCHIVIST

No. Please…

NOT!SASHA

Sorry, John, but this is –

[SOUND OF STONE AND BRICK SUDDENLY SHIFTING. A SCREAM FROM THE NOT!SASHA.]

[SILENCE]

ARCHIVIST

What?

[SLOW FOOTSTEPS]

MYSTERY FIGURE

Mr. Sims?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MYSTERY FIGURE

I think it’s time we had a talk.

[CLICK]

MAG080 – The Librarian

Statement #0170216–B

[CLICK] [CLICK]

LEITNER

Please! I don't know how much time we have.

ARCHIVIST

So you said.

[PIPE IS PLACED ON TABLE]

LEITNER

Is that necessary? You think I pose a danger to you?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Yes I do.

LEITNER

Then take it with you, but I can't afford to just sit here.

ARCHIVIST

So talk fast.

LEITNER

Could we at least have this conversation in the tunnels?

ARCHIVIST

I'm not going back down there. That thing… Is it dead?

LEITNER

Unlikely. Whether something like that can actually be destroyed… It is trapped. I, I hope for a very long time.

ARCHIVIST

And Sasha… The real one?

LEITNER

Was that her name? I'm afraid she's gone. Whatever it does to those it takes, they don't come back. She's dead.

Do you need a moment?

ARCHIVIST

No. No, I'm… You're not what I expected.

LEITNER

I suppose not. My family emigrated when I was very young. English was always my first language. I used to adopt an accent sometimes when meeting people, a sort of personal joke, but truth be told, my

Norwegian is terrible. Now, are you going to help me or not?

ARCHIVIST

You first. You want my help, you answer my questions. Agreed?

LEITNER

Agreed.

ARCHIVIST

Good. Good.

Statement of Jurgen Leitner. February 16th, 2017. Statement begins.

LEITNER

You're quite like her, you know. I suppose that's no surprise. Anyway, your questions?

ARCHIVIST

Right. Let's start with what you did down there. How you… trapped it.

[BOOKS ARE PLACED ON TABLE]

LEITNER

An unexpurgated copy of Ruskin's *The Seven Lamps of Architecture,*

published in 1845. Of course, Ruskin didn't even begin writing the book until 1846, and the text of this one varies markedly from the version that was distributed. It gives an acute sense of the walls pressing in around you, and if consumed recklessly, will physically entomb the reader.

Over the years, I have found that it interacts with Smirke's architecture, and those tunnels specifically, in a more predictable way. By carefully reading specific passages in certain locations, I am able to exercise… a degree of control over the substance of the tunnels.

ARCHIVIST

I didn't hear you say anything down there.

LEITNER

I said reading. It doesn't need to be spoken aloud.

ARCHIVIST

Right. So you can change the tunnels?

LEITNER

I can. Though even setting aside the obvious dangers, it's a time-consuming and imprecise process. That said, I will admit that when you began to explore again, I… closed off certain passages, and remade others. I, I wanted to keep you contained while deciding whether to make contact.

ARCHIVIST

You moved the tunnels for me?

LEITNER

The upper levels, yes. Made them more rational, actually. It didn't strike you as odd that you were able to map them in a matter of weeks?

ARCHIVIST

I thought I was just getting a sense of the place. I suppose you left the rubbish around for me as well, giving me hints? And the arrow?

LEITNER

No. I thought I was being very careful cleaning up after myself, but you have keener eyes than I gave you credit for. I should have expected that, I suppose.

The arrow, however, was not mine. The 'Not-Sasha' had come down several times. I suspect it was almost as curious about me as you were.

Perhaps it thought you might have better luck flushing me out. I suppose, in a way, it was right. In retrospect, using *The Seven Lamps* so much was perhaps unwise. It is possible I unbalanced Smirke's architecture somewhat, however cautious I might have tried to be.

ARCHIVIST

And the other book?

LEITNER

Hardly a **book.** Barely twelve pages. It is entitled *A Disappearance.* If read cover to cover, it removes one from the world. I cannot say precisely what that means, only that the assistant I assigned to it, Jacob Feng, was never seen again.

I have found, however, that reading only one or two words is sufficient to hide me from the prying eyes of your master. It allowed me to talk with Gertrude in relative safety, and occasionally come above ground for my own ends.

ARCHIVIST

My master? We'll get to that. How long have you been down there?

LEITNER

Hard to say. I've been in hiding for over twenty years now, ever since my library was destroyed.

Obviously I have not spent all that time below your Institute. The old Millbank prison tunnels stretch out a very long way, and there are other entrances than the one below the Archives. I have a small number of… secure locations, though since Gertrude's death I have been reluctant to leave the tunnels. I dislike spending too much time in the open.

I am **always** being hunted. Both by creatures like the ones you have

encountered, and by certain human individuals who believe I am to blame for the books that destroyed their loved ones. Three years ago, I made the mistake of spending a full night outside my safehouses. I was almost beaten to death by an angry goth.

ARCHIVIST

[chuckling slightly] That'll be our Gerard.

LEITNER

I don't follow.

ARCHIVIST

I wouldn't worry about him. He passed away a couple of years ago.

LEITNER

That is hardly my point.

ARCHIVIST

So are you to blame?

LEITNER

For what?

ARCHIVIST

For the books. Or did you just stick your name on them by accident? Why the 'Library of Jurgen Leitner'?

LEITNER

I… thought that I could control them; that I alone had the knowledge to contain them. Back then, I believed they were simply books. Horrifying, powerful, yes, but with rules, limits that could be charted. I was a fool. I had no idea what forces lay behind them, or that they had other servants that might come searching.

I was ruthless, I will admit that. I don't know how many assistants I sacrificed to learn the secrets of the volumes I collected. Dozens, at least. Only a few escaped with their life and mind intact, and even then they were deeply marked. But I was relentless. I saw myself as a guardian, a reverse Pandora, gathering the evils of the world and locking them away.

And so I branded them with my seal. I told myself that if any should escape, such a mark could help me retrieve them. But I think, in my heart, I dreamed of my work becoming known. That "The Library of Jurgen Leitner" would stand as a symbol of courage and protection. Hubris. I suppose it is fitting punishment that my name has become a watchword for evil, spoken by those who only know it as marking the darkest, most terrible of secrets.

My name has become a curse.

ARCHIVIST

Tell me from the beginning.

LEITNER

I was born the heir to great wealth. My family used to deal in manufacture: steel, textiles, all sorts. But, by my time, it was largely a matter of extensive property holdings and carefully managed investments. Money making money.

There was never the need for me to learn anything of worth. I suppose in another life I might have been another rich wastrel, content to squander my inheritance on indulgence and comfort, but I always felt a calling to make something of myself. To matter. I had no interest in politics and, while I was certainly no fool, my attempts at academia were ultimately unsatisfying. Business bored me to tears. The only thing I was ever truly talented at was acquiring things. I suppose you could say I was skilled at shopping.

I don't say that to be glib, nor as a comment on my wealth. I don't mean I gained any satisfaction from wasting money on vulgar Bond Street trinkets. I mean, I had a genuine and pronounced talent for finding items of worth and convincing their owners to part with them. The most valuable things always need to be hunted, and that was where I excelled. It started by simply cross-referencing auction catalogues with local records and slightly obscure books of art history, but soon I had a network of contacts and took dinner with some of the most eccentric curio dealers in the world.

It was Desmond Lorell that first told me of the books. They were a rumour, as these things always are, and he had **no** idea of the dangers. "Magic books" he called them. He had believed them to be coded spellbooks derived, of all things, from the writings of Merlin!

Poor Desmond. When he finally found one, an old leather-bound thing titled The Stalwart Hunters' Almanac, he had no idea what to do with it. I suppose, looking back, his death was a very good thing for me. The extent of the mutilation, and how closely it correlated with the passages he had described to me, left little doubt as to the connection. So when I acquired the book myself I took exceptional precautions.

The thing that surprises me most, I think, is how readily I accepted the existence of the supernatural. I had occasionally made purchases before that that had caused… anomalies, but nothing like those books. Yet as soon as their nature became apparent, I simply accepted it and began to factor it into my dealings with them. It was shortly afterwards I hired my first assistant. A dour man, by the name of Albert Stross. He barely lasted a fortnight.

It didn't take me long to track down other books like Lorell's, and it seemed like almost overnight I had found my purpose. I was to be the keeper of evil tomes. To begin with, I never gave much thought to their origins; I simply concerned myself with acquiring them, and making sure I had staff I could spare to study them. It was easier than I expected, and I'm always surprised nobody attempted such a thing before me. I suppose few walk away from their first encounter with any desire to look for more, if they walk away at all. And of those that do, none would have had my skill at finding them, or my extensive resources.

Luck played a significant role as well. It was shortly after I had begun to have problems storing them that I discovered the work of

the architect Robert Smirke. There were several volumes in my possession that, if kept them close to each other reacted… very badly. But Smirke's writings, his principles of balance between opposing forces, gave me some inkling as to a solution. Today was not the first time my life has been saved by his architecture. I commissioned a house to be built, based on some of his designs, and spent a good deal of time and money gaining access to existing buildings he had worked on, with the aim of storing the books safely. I believe at about that time I commissioned my bookplates and began to label them.

And then the house was complete, and I had my library. A vast, lopsided structure, by turns cavernous or maze-like, depending on the needs of the inmates. By the end, I had nine hundred and seventy-eight volumes in my library. Some innocuous, some unsettling and some utterly murderous. In the end, I didn't have much time to enjoy my achievement. It was only a few years after the house was complete that the attack came.

You must understand, I had only ever encountered these dark powers in the form of books or the occasional antique. I had no idea that there were people or creatures out there that served them. So I was not prepared. All my defences were inward facing, to prevent the contents of my library getting out. I suppose getting in must have seemed a trifle.

It started with the visitors. Almost every day, some stranger would turn up at my door and ask to see my collection. Now, whatever my secret ambitions might have been, I was very careful not to let word

get out about what I was doing. And these people, they were… wrong somehow. They didn't move as people should move, and their cadence was very strange when they spoke. They almost always forgot to blink.

Even then I didn't realise what was coming, and simply sent them away with a firm refusal. When it actually happened, it was so all fast I barely had time to register it. One moment, I was typing a new catalogue entry for *A Journal of a Plague Year,* and the next… everything was screaming. My assistants, the books, even me.

Thomas McMann was stabbed through the throat by something with too many teeth and limbs like knives. Mary Johnson was pulled into a cavernous maw that opened beneath her. Gregory Todd ran into a door that shouldn't have been there. A great hand reached down through the roof and plucked away Leandra Toulouse. And there was one other assistant, whose… whose name I don't recall, but the last I saw of him, he was being pulled into a great, pulsating pile of meat.

I don't know how I escaped. Perhaps because I designed the house, I knew how to best move through it. Perhaps I was sensible enough to steer clear of the rooms that had fallen into darkness, or burned with a fire that seemed to leave the books untouched. Perhaps they let me go. Or perhaps, once again, it was simply luck.

I didn't look back as I fled. Nothing seemed to chase me, at least not then. I had none of the books with me, and that was what they were after. Of course, by the time I realised that, there were many others

who were hunting me. Mostly vengeance-minded folk who had lost someone to the books, plastered with my name, that were now free once again. It was easier to let the world think I was dead and, to one degree or another, I've been in hiding ever since.

ARCHIVIST

Huh. You're right.

LEITNER

About which part?

ARCHIVIST

You **were** a fool.

LEITNER

Hmm.

ARCHIVIST

Why didn't you burn them?

LEITNER

Pride. If they were destroyed, what was I to guard? Even so, I don't believe that would have solved as many problems as you think. Many of them wouldn't have burned, and some even liked the flames. And those that did, I now believe, would have been released to take a different form.

ARCHIVIST

But you didn't know any of this when you had almost a thousand of them in your care?

LEITNER

I've spent twenty years trying to learn from my mistakes.

ARCHIVIST

You said you didn't take any of them with you, so where did you get these?

LEITNER

When I started working with Gertrude, she hunted down some editions I thought might help.

ARCHIVIST

And why was Gertrude helping you?

LEITNER

Aside from my knowledge about the books? I think she was lonely. I didn't meet her until about six years ago, after she'd lost the last of her own assistants. She would mention them sometimes. I believe she missed having someone to talk to on occasion.

ARCHIVIST

I… I didn't know Gertrude had assistants.

LEITNER

Of course. Three of them, each meeting an unpleasant end. So, when she found me, it seemed natural that we help each other. In this instance, that meant finding certain useful books.

ARCHIVIST

Like *The Key of Solomon?*

LEITNER

That one was a mistake. I thought that, in the tunnels, there might be the stability to examine it properly, learn something of the forces arrayed against us. But it went wrong. We had to destroy it. I should have known, really. It was one of the few volumes that contained elements of several different powers.

ARCHIVIST

You keep talking about these… powers? These forces arrayed against you. What are they?

LEITNER

[Sighing] I'd hoped you would at least know that much by now. But I suppose you are simply the observer, and making these connections is not your role. Gertrude could be much the same at times.

ARCHIVIST

Just tell me!

LEITNER

There are… entities in this world. Beings of vast, dark power. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say they are ‘next to the world’, rather than in it. Their true existence could not function in the universe we live in, at least not as it is now. They have nothing in their pure state that could be present in the physical world so they sit in…

ARCHIVIST

Different dimensions.

LEITNER

No, I don’t think so. If there are such things, then these beings are linked inexorably to ours. They are not within our world, but they can… affect it in certain ways: reaching out with their will to change things. I don’t know where they come from or how they came to exist, but they are, from what I can determine, effectively eternal.

ARCHIVIST

Are you… are you trying to tell me all of this is at the behest of… evil gods?

LEITNER

Oh, there are certainly those who see them as gods. A few even go

so far as to try and worship them, but I don't find it helpful to think of them like that. Perhaps you could liken them to one of the old pantheons, each with its own rituals, agendas and spheres of influence, but I find simplifying them in such a way makes them harder to truly understand.

The 'gods' were conceived of by humankind as a reflection of themselves, their motives and actions divinely powerful, but in essence purely human. These… 'things'… I find them hard enough to understand without trying to force human frameworks onto them.

ARCHIVIST

So the creatures are, what, priests? These books, their holy texts?

LEITNER

I told you it was an unhelpful analogy. Let's try another one. Um… Imagine, you are an ant, and you have never before seen a human. Then one day, into your colony, a huge fingernail is thrust, scraping and digging. You flee to another entrance, only to be confronted by a staring eye gazing at you. You climb to the top, trying to find escape and, above you, can see the vast dark shadow of a boot falling upon you. Would that ant be able to construct these things into the form of a single human being? Or would it believe itself to be under attack by three different, equally terrible, but very distinct assailants?

ARCHIVIST

So the books, the monsters, they're part of these beings? Just extensions of them? Fingers being pushed into our world?

LEITNER

The books are, I think, their essences in a purer form. The other things that stalk us, from what I know of them, they have varying wills of their own. All in service of the thing they're a part of, but not directly controlled by the mind beneath them. At least, inasmuch as these entities have something we could recognise as a mind.

ARCHIVIST

Like a… a, a muscle, spasming on reflex?

LEITNER

Yes, that's actually rather good.

ARCHIVIST

It would explain Michael's identity issues.

LEITNER

Michael? Oh… that, that's what the Distortion calls itself these days, isn't it? That one is part of a power that my assistant Domingo used to call "Esmentiaras", which I believe translates as 'it is lies' or 'it is lying'. At the time, of course, we just used it as a way to classify books. I call it the Spiral. It deals in fooling the senses, in making you see and hear things that are not there, in drawing you

into mazes and making you doubt your own sanity.

ARCHIVIST

Fractals.

LEITNER

Yes. It seems to have a particular fondness for them.

ARCHIVIST

What about bones? Does one of them manifest with, with bones?

LEITNER

[HEAVY SIGH]

You're thinking too literally. Examining the physical categorisation, but ignoring the meaning of the thing. What are the bones? In the Distortion, your "Michael", the structure of a skeleton, an established reality in **your** mind, is twisted and warped into an impossible form. But in other cases? Are they a symbol of slaughter and butchery? Are they the familiar made wrong? Or are they simply part of the messy, physicality of flesh?

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, this is a lot to take in.

LEITNER

Well, do so quickly. We've wasted enough time on your questions.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Then I'll make this one simple: did you kill Gertrude?

LEITNER

No. Don't be absurd.

ARCHIVIST

Then who did?

LEITNER

This is a distraction! You're in no danger –

ARCHIVIST

Who?

LEITNER

I believe it was Elias.

ARCHIVIST

What? Why?

LEITNER

I assume he discovered we were planning to destroy the Archives.

ARCHIVIST

Gertrude was going to destroy the Archives?

LEITNER

This is why I need those files. I searched this place thoroughly, and they're not here, so I assume Elias took them when he killed her. I need your help to get into his office.

ARCHIVIST

But the cameras? They showed him.

LEITNER

Simple mechanical eyes? In **his** place of power? You think he can't control everything they see? Assuming such interference wouldn't ruin them beyond recovery, of course.

ARCHIVIST

This place belongs to one of them, doesn't it?

LEITNER

You know the answer to that.

ARCHIVIST

The Eye.

LEITNER

I have also heard it called Beholding.

ARCHIVIST

And I…

LEITNER

You belong to it, too.

ARCHIVIST

I… Uh… I… I think I need some air.

[SOUND OF FUMBLING IN DRAWER]

LEITNER

We don't have time for you to have a breakdown, Archivist.

[CHAIR SCRAPES ON FLOOR]

ARCHIVIST

I'm going to have a cigarette. Don't…

[DOOR OPENS]

Don't.

[DOOR CLOSES]

[SILENCE]

LEITNER

I'm not sure you would have liked him, you know. He's paranoid enough. But I don't think he's got the stomach for it.

[SILENCE]

[DOOR OPENS]

[SURPRISED BREATH]

[CLICK]

ELIAS

Well. This **is** a surprise.

[CHAIR SCRAPES ON FLOOR]

ELIAS

Reach for a book and I **will** kill you.

[CHAIR SCRAPES BUT SLOWER, AS IF RESUMING SEAT]

ELIAS

How much have you told him?

LEITNER

Enough.

ELIAS

About Gertrude?

LEITNER

No. No, I didn't have time.

ELIAS

I've wondered for **so** long who it could be down there. Who was helping her. I honestly never would have guessed.

LEITNER

How did you know I was here?

ELIAS

I didn't. You're very well hidden. But John is not, and he failed to take the same precautions I'm sure you took for granted with Gertrude. I knew he was talking to someone. And it turns out to be Jurgen Leitner himself. *[Soft chuckling]* What an honour.

LEITNER

[Begging] Elias, please!

ELIAS

What did you want from him?

LEITNER

The files. The ones you took from Gertrude.

ELIAS

Planning a little light arson, are we, Jurgen?

LEITNER

It's not just the Institute and you know it. They had everything she had found on the Stranger.

ELIAS

I know. It's, um… what do they call it?

LEITNER

The Unknowing.

ELIAS

[Chuckles] Creativity never was their forte.

LEITNER

You of **all** people should want to stop them.

ELIAS

And we will. But I don't think we'll need your help.

LEITNER

And what's he going to think when he gets back?

ELIAS

Well, he was always going to need to fly the nest at some point. Go out and see the world for himself.

LEITNER

He might die.

ELIAS

It's always a danger. Almost always.

LEITNER

Elias, it doesn't have to be like –

[EXTENDED SOUNDS OF BRUTAL PIPE MURDER]

[PIPE DROPS AND ROLLS]

[DOOR OPENS, CLOSES]

[SILENCE EXCEPT FOR THE SOUND OF DRIPPING]

[DEAD SILENCE]

[DOOR OPENS]

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, I've been quit for five years now, but th–

[STUNNED SILENCE]

Oh.

Oh god… I need to… Uh… I need to, um… *[trails off almost incoherently]*

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

TIM

I think it's working again.

MARTIN

Tim, where were we?

TIM

…yeah, yeah it's recording.

MARTIN

Forget the bloody tapes, Tim! Are we sure this is… this is here?

TIM

Yes. Because the tape works now.

MARTIN

How long was it?

TIM

I don't know. And I don't care.

MARTIN

Sorry? Sorry, what? How can you not **care**!?

TIM

Because this is us now. Worms. Monsters. Corridors. They'll keep happening until one of them kills us, and we've just got to deal with it.

[SIGH]

Any sign of the woman?

MARTIN

I don't think so. We should have helped her.

TIM

No.

MARTIN

But we could have tried!

TIM

How?

MARTIN

…

TIM

Look. There's no point talking about it. It happened. I hope it doesn't happen again. Statement fucking ends.

[SILENCE]

MARTIN

We… we should look for John. Maybe we can still help.

TIM

It's been days. At least.

MARTIN

We can't just sit here moping!

TIM

It’s probably already killed him.

MARTIN

Don’t joke about that, okay?

TIM

Fine.

MARTIN

Tim!

TIM

Try his office.

MARTIN

Yeah. Right.

[DOOR OPENS TO THE SOUND OF DRIPPING]

John?

Oh. Oh no.

TIM

I told you he was going to do something like this.

MARTIN

Oh, no, no… Who is it?

TIM

I told you.

MARTIN

Oh John… What have you done?

[CLICK]

THE MAGNUS ARCHIVES WILL RETURN LATE 2017

Season 2 has featured:

Jonathan Sims as **The Archivist**

- Alexander J. Newall as **Martin Blackwood**
- Mike LeBeau as **Tim Stoker**
- Ben Meredith as **Elias Bouchard**
- Eve Hewitt as **Not!Sasha**
- Frank Voss as **PC Basira Khan**
- Lydia Nicholas as **Melanie King**
- **Sue Sims** as **Gertrude Robinson**

- **Imogen Harris** as **Helen Richardson**
- Luke Booys as **Michael**
- **Harvey Kesselman** as **Sergeant Walter Heller**
- **Tim Ledsam** as **Jordan Kennedy**
- Fay Roberts as **Detective Alice “Daisy” Tonner**
- Carrie Cohen as **Mary Keay**
- Fran Bushe as **Tessa Winters**
- Perdita Stott as **Karolina Górka**
- **Paul Sims** as **Jurgen Leitner**

MAG080.4 – Season 3 Trailer

[CLICK]

DAISY

Huh.

ELIAS

Something wrong, Detective?

DAISY

How many tape recorders you got?

ELIAS

Can't say I'm entirely sure. We have all sorts of old equipment in storage, I think. You wish to use it for the interviews?

DAISY

Probably not.

ELIAS

And you're sure you want to do it in here? We haven't had a chance to properly clean it.

DAISY

[PAPER RUSTLES]

Won't take long.

ELIAS

If you say so. I warn you, some of my people have a tendency to… ramble.

DAISY

I just need to know where he is.

ELIAS

As you wish. Who do you want first?

DAISY

Don't care.

ELIAS

Right you are. You'll be alright on your own for a minute?

DAISY

[Snort] That a joke?

ELIAS

Some people find this place unsettling.

DAISY

Mr. Bouchard, I'm not the one who needs to be scared.

[DOOR OPENS]

ELIAS

Whatever you say, Detective.

[DOOR CLOSES]

[SILENCE BUT FOR PAGES TURNING]

[THE FAINTEST HINT OF CALLIOPE MUSIC STARTS TO PLAY]

[DAISY OPENS DOOR]

DAISY

Anyone there?

[MUSIC FADES AWAY]

Goddamn it.

[CLICK]

MAG081 – A Guest for Mr. Spider

Statement #0171802–A

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Jonathan Sims, Head Arch– *[sigh]* former Head Archivist at the Magnus Institute, London, regarding a childhood encounter with a book formerly possessed by Jurgen Leitner. Statement recorded by subject, February 18th, 2017.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I have been thinking a lot over the last couple of days about how this began. For me, that is. I cannot help but feel that hand in hand with the death of Jurgen Leitner came the death of the lens through which I viewed the world. Even in the depths of my paranoia, something I now attribute to the presence of… of the being that was posing as Sasha, like a grain of sand behind my eye, rubbing and irritating, but with no clear cause.

Even then, I knew how the world worked. There were supernatural things in the world, but they were rare – isolated and exaggerated,

vastly outnumbered by wild tales and drunken imaginings. The one name I held in my mind as a true source of evil was Jurgen Leitner, and I knew him as the worst of it, for it was his name that had marked the encounter that scarred my youth. And of course, in my heart, I knew that no-one else could have possibly seen anything as horrible as I had. Well, maybe I could have named one person, but… I watched him disappear forever.

But now I know what Jurgen Leitner truly was. A spoiled child, playing with forces he barely understood, calling himself a jailor to things he couldn't even conceptualise. There is so much more horror in this world than I had ever dreamt possible. And my suffering, I now know, pales in comparison to what has befallen others far more innocent than I. But perhaps not for long.

These beings that lurk beyond us know my name and, if I understand Leitner correctly, one of them has already claimed me. The Eye. Appropriate, I suppose. I do not know how many of them there are, or precisely how they separate, but I do know that the Eye – Beholding – was not the first that I encountered in my life. The first was the Spider. The Web. And I have no idea what that might mean.

I was eight years old when my grandmother gave me the book. No-one ever believes me when I tell them my age. I don't know if it's the already greying hair or something in my demeanour, but they always act surprised when I mention being a child in the Nineties. I will admit the last few years have aged me considerably. Regardless, it must have been a year or two since the library was

destroyed, though I had no inkling of it at the time.

My parents had passed away when I was too young to really remember them; my father of an accidental fall when I was two, and my mother a couple of years later from complications during routine surgery. My extended family weren't close and I had no siblings, so I ended up living with my grandmother, a kind enough woman, but she had already raised her children, and the resentment she felt at having to raise another was never something she completely managed to hide from me. It seemed to mingle with her grief, so the sadness over her own lost son would manifest in recriminations and bitterness.

Saying this aloud I worry I'm painting too bleak a picture of my grandmother. She cared for me as well as she was able, and whatever her private feelings might have been, she did try her best.

And I was hardly an easy child to deal with. While I may not have shared the inclinations of my peers towards active mischief, I was precocious and impatient, quick to talk back, and even quicker to wander off whenever I grew bored. By the time I was eight, the police had had to return me from my explorations at least three times, and my grandmother swore that if it happened again she would begin locking me inside the house. And I fully believed her.

She did discover that the one thing that could keep me rooted to the spot were books. Television pacified me for a half hour or so, but a book would keep me in place until I had finished it, and for all the voracity of my reading, I was never actually that fast,

lingering on pages that caught my imagination. So in this she saw a solution. The difficulty was I was also very picky, and looking back on it there was little rhyme or reason to what I did or did not care to read. I never tried to really define it, but I think the closest I could come to putting it into words was that I hated to read anything I felt like I had read before. This made it something of a nightmare to keep me entertained, as any author with a distinctive enough style would only ever afford me a single book's worth of reading before I tired of them. I can still hear my grandmother's voice, trying to hide that irritation bubbling up: "But you *like* Diana Wynne Jones!"

In the end, she came up with a solution that now seems like a stroke of genius, although at the time I found it strange and bothersome. The local library was some distance away, so between visits, my grandmother would go to all the local charity and second-hand bookshops and buy up every book they had that was fifty pence or less, then she would present me the pile and I would look through it until I found something I liked, or at least tolerated, and then I would read that. After I was completely done with the pile, she would donate it to one of the other charity shops.

It wasn't something that could be kept up forever, but it worked for longer than you'd think. It was shortly after she had started with this system that I found… **my** first Leitner.

One of the things that annoyed me most about my grandmother's approach was that she never seemed to exercise any sort of judgement at all about how appropriate something might be for me.

I didn't mind this so much when it let me read a slightly-too-gruesome thriller, but she would also often present me with stacks full of bright, square cardboard books, of the sort you'd read aloud to a pre-schooler. These bothered me far more than any dull technical manual or dog-eared dictionary, as I couldn't help but feel it was making a comment about my intelligence. I mean, obviously that was absurd – I watched my grandmother grabbing the books without even glancing at their covers, just checking the price and stacking them. But somehow, it still felt like an insult that she might in some way think I was at a level to be reading *The Elephant and the Balloon,* or whatever nonsense it was.

So, when searching through the latest trove of books, I felt my hand grip another square, thin volume, I almost discarded it without even looking. But I did look. And what I saw immediately struck me as odd. Instead of the garish colours that I expected, the cover was monochrome, matt white with scratchy black webs covering its corners, and in the middle of the cover, half-written, half-carved in a childlike hand was the title: *A Guest for Mr. Spider.*

On the back cover there was no blurb, just a crudely sketched image of what I assumed to be the eponymous Mr. Spider. He stood upright on his spindly back legs, attached to a disproportionately swollen abdomen. The rest of his legs were splayed at odd angles, as though in the middle of some sort of dance, and his head had no mouth, but was covered asymmetrically with eight eyes of all shapes and sizes. On the top of it there sat a small bowler hat, which had been drawn in a splash of red ink, unlike the black and

white which made up the rest of the image.

I was a bit taken aback. I had seen plenty of children's books that tried to be a little bit scary, or ended up being unintentionally disturbing, but this felt different. There was something to this drawing, to this book, that I'd never seen before. A violence seemed to ooze from it, sticky and pungent. I had no idea what was inside, but I knew that I hated that book. And I knew that wasn't going to stop me opening it. You know what was immediately inside the cover. If you're in a position to be listening to this, you know exactly whose mark was there.

The book itself starts with a blank room in a simple house, almost entirely bare save for a small table with a pot of flowers on it and two doors. The flowers are drooping in a way that might just be a poor rendering of bluebells, but with the black and white it just makes them look sick.

In the centre of the room stands the figure I take to be Mr. Spider, his arms are still splayed wildly, and his back is turned to the reader. He is staring, it seems, at the door on the left. On the next page the image is identical, save that the arms are now in different places. The third and the fourth are the same again. There is no text on any of them.

Then, on page five, the words 'KNOCK KNOCK' appear next to the door in the same style as the words of the title. Mr. Spider's arms are suddenly straight and still by his side. The text comes again: 'WHO IS IT, MR. SPIDER?'

The door opens, and stood there is a thin, scrawny looking fly clutching a box. It is crudely dressed in an ill-fitting suit. It is hard to tell from the fly's face, but his attitude seems to be one of trepidation or anxiety. 'IT'S MR. BLUEBOTTLE', the text reads, 'AND HE'S BROUGHT YOU A CAKE'. The next page is a close-up rendering of a large slice of cake in a box; it does have colour, but it's a pale green that makes me think of disease. Then comes a page showing the insectoid face of Mr. Bluebottle, the worry now stark etched there. Then there is a page with no picture at all, just the words: 'MR. SPIDER DOESN'T LIKE IT'.

Then the book returns to the room. Both doors are once again closed. The only difference between this image and the one on the very first page is the ink that seems to have been spilled on the lower half of the right-hand door. There are several more pages of Mr. Spider waiting, his arms a windmill of activity.

Then another 'KNOCK KNOCK' on the left door, and Mr. Spider goes rigid. 'WHO IS IT, MR. SPIDER?' In that position it's clear his belly is even larger than it was before. The door opens on another fly, this one slightly larger, wearing a pale yellow dress. 'IT'S MRS. FRUIT', the book announces, 'AND SHE'S BROUGHT YOU SOME FLOWERS'. The flowers on the next page look even less healthy than the ones on the table, and are coloured with a gentle pink. A close-up on her face, frozen in stark fear. 'MR. SPIDER DOESN'T EAT FLOWERS', the next page announces, and Mrs. Fruit is gone, the door closed again.

The right hand door is more noticeably stained now; the once-black

ink now seems like a dark, crusty brown at the hinges and the seams. The flowers brought by the doomed fruit fly now stand on the table, but they are more clearly wilted and stained a deep, vivid red. Mr. Spider's abdomen is engorged and straining, and where his mouth would be is marked by the same dried brown colour as the door. His arms are moving once again.

On the messier page, with more colour to contrast it, I can see that his hands aren't empty, but are weaving and pulling on thin grey threads, that stretch all around the room, and out through the cracks in both doors.

'KNOCK KNOCK. WHO IS IT, MR. SPIDER?' Behind the door stands a large, burly fly, this one dressed in baggy overalls. Next to it stands a much smaller fly, dressed in what appears to be a child's version of those same overalls. They are both openly weeping. 'IT'S MR. HORSE. AND HE'S BROUGHT YOU HIS SON'. The close-up on that fly's face is an image that still comes to me when I'm having trouble sleeping. Then the text: 'MR. SPIDER WANTS MORE.'

When we go back to the picture of the empty parlour it's smeared all over with dark reds and browns. Mr. Spider's abdomen now dwarfs the rest of him and seeps a sticky red, along with the now clearly visible grey thread. He has turned to face the reader. Staring into me as his arms move and move and move.

The second-to-last page shows the right-hand door up close, the stains and the ink seeping from the edges. It looks like it has a cut-away panel that can be opened onto the final page. 'MR. SPIDER

WANTS ANOTHER GUEST FOR DINNER' it reads, 'IT IS POLITE TO KNOCK'. I feel my hand closing into a fist and reaching for the door, preparing to rap my knuckles on the grimy old wood.

It was at that moment that a hand far bigger than my own slapped the book from my grip, before shoving me hard in the chest and sending me sprawling onto the floor. I was in the park a few roads away from my house. Had I taken the book there to read? Or did I somehow wander there while engrossed in it? To this day I don't know, but I was in the park, and standing over me was… you know, for the life of me I can't remember his name. Thomas, maybe? Daniel? I almost want to say Michael, but that isn't it. He saved my life, and I can't remember his name. Why does your memory do that to so many important people? Some people deserve to be remembered.

He was a bully. Eighteen or nineteen, I think. He helped my grandmother with odd jobs sometimes, just a bit of cash-in-hand work, but he had always taken a dislike to me. At the time I had convinced myself that it was because of how smart I was, since he was, to put it charitably, not very clever, but I have since come to the conclusion that I was a deeply annoying child. Still, he was more than twice my age, so I'm certainly not excusing his decision to torment me whenever he got the chance. Name-calling, the odd beating, sometimes stealing from me – all very standard. He just made the extremely poor choice to do it at that exact moment.

My tormentor bent down and picked up what he had slapped out of my hands and examined the book. I was too dazed to protest, and

he started to mock “little Einstein” for reading “a kiddie book”. But as he did so, he flicked through it, and as his eyes passed over more and more of the page, the words tailed off, and he seemed to be reading it himself. His hands shook ever so slightly as he slowly made his way through it, and his legs began to move. It was jerky and unsteady, and he didn’t seem to notice that he was doing it.

I had no idea what was going on, not really, but I was somehow desperate to get that book back. He was much bigger than me, though, so all I could do was follow as he walked down alleys and side streets. There were fewer and fewer people about, and I realised with a start that I had failed to notice nightfall. At the far end of a quiet residential road, he walked up to one of the houses. I never found it again, and for all I knew it might have actually been his house. He was still reading. When he reached the entrance, he held up the book and placed it on the front door. I saw that cut-away panel of Mr. Spider’s stained and bloody right-hand door. And he knocked on it twice. I saw the words clearly in my mind almost more than I heard the sound: ‘KNOCK KNOCK’.

The door opened, and inside was dark. Against that darkness I could see the thin grey strands wrapped around the limbs of my former bully. And then, from inside, stretched two impossibly long limbs, bony and covered in coarse, black hair. For a second, there was almost the start of a scream, but the legs wrapped around him too quickly, and he disappeared into the doorway and out of sight. It slammed behind him, and he was gone, taking the book with him.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

You can see, I hope, why this engendered in me something of a fascination with the supernatural, and some deep feelings regarding the name ‘Jurgen Leitner’. I cannot corroborate this story in any real form for obvious reasons. My grandmother peacefully passed away five years ago and there is no-one else who would have records of anything other than the general context. If I were assessing this as someone else’s statement, I would have dismissed it out of hand, and don’t think that doesn’t eat at me. But it is so vivid in my mind. The spider’s legs reaching from that tiny door. The first of the dark powers to touch me, perhaps, but it did not claim me.

Speaking this out loud for the first time, I am struck by something else. The feeling I have been living with my whole life, that if that poor idiot hadn’t gotten involved he would still be alive. A strange conviction that, if I had been able to face that thing myself, maybe I could have saved him.

Stopped it. Ridiculous, of course, I was eight, but it has made me reconsider my attitude to getting help. I have consistently kept the others at arm’s length, tried to deal with things myself and it… it hasn’t gone well. Whatever is going on, this ‘Unknowing’ that S– *Not!* Sasha was talking about, Elias killing Gertrude and maybe Leitner as well… I need help. I need allies. I just wish this revelation didn’t come just as everyone is convinced I’m a deranged killer.

[SOUND OF KEY IN LOCK AND DOOR OPENS]

ARCHIVIST

Oh, um… hello!

GEORGIE

Everything okay, John?

[DOOR CLOSES]

ARCHIVIST

Er, yeah. Just recording some thoughts. Didn't… I didn't know when you were going to be home.

GEORGIE

Sure.

[COAT IS PUT DOWN]

Did you… clean the kitchen?

ARCHIVIST

Er, a bit. I, I mean, I can't exactly pay you anything; I thought…

GEORGIE

It's fine. To be honest, it's nice to have someone keep the Admiral company while I'm out.

ARCHIVIST

He literally just sleeps on the radiator. I… I've got a lot of time to kill.

GEORGIE

You… looking for a new job yet?

ARCHIVIST

It's complicated, there's… there's a lot of stuff hanging over from the last one I've got to take care of.

GEORGIE

Well, like I said, you're welcome here as long as you need.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose you are rolling in all that sock money.

GEORGIE

Urgh.

ARCHIVIST

Up to your eyeballs in mattresses.

GEORGIE

Don't. They did send me one, you know. Oh, it was dreadful. I couldn't sleep on it. I managed three days before my back gave out.

I've still got it somewhere in the guest room, if the other one's not up to your exacting standards.

ARCHIVIST

Ooh… I think I'm alright. I was going to make a cup of tea if you want one?

GEORGIE

Maybe later, I've got recording of my own to do.

ARCHIVIST

Right you are. I'll… I'll keep quiet.

GEORGIE

I wouldn't worry too much. The studio's pretty well soundproofed.

ARCHIVIST

What's this one about?

GEORGIE

Oh, I'm trying to find some new angle on the Ancient Ram Inn.

ARCHIVIST

I thought there'd already been a *What the Ghost* on that?

GEORGIE

No. No, you're thinking of every *other* hacky, ghost podcast. But, you know, if it sells a few T-shirts….

ARCHIVIST

Oh, I, yes, I meant to say, actually, thank you for –

GEORGIE

Oh, it's fine. Though I don't know what sort of "employment dispute" leaves you without a change of clothes.

ARCHIVIST

You wouldn't believe me.

GEORGIE

Do you even listen to my podcast? I'll believe anything. But, on air.

ARCHIVIST

I will tell you, Georgie, I… I just…

GEORGIE

It's alright. There's no rush. I mean, it was clearly pretty bad, so only when you're ready. If you're ready.

ARCHIVIST

Thanks. I… Thank you.

GEORGIE

Sure. Anyway, I got recording to be doing. Catch you after.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[DOOR OPENS & CLOSES]

[ARCHIVIST EXHALES]

[CLICK]

MAG082 – The Eyewitnesses

Statement #0171802–B

[CLICK]

DAISY

Fine.

MARTIN

Sorry. I just… I feel more comfortable with it on.

DAISY

I said it was fine.

MARTIN

Yeah, right, so, um… Statement of Martin Blackwood, interviewed by Detective D– Tonner. February 18th, two thousand and –

DAISY

What are you doing?

MARTIN

I… I'm making a statement. Isn't that what you want? My statement?

DAISY

No. I just need you to answer the question.

MARTIN

Oh. Okay. I mean, y-you wanted a statement last time. About…it was… when I found Gertrude. Or at least your partner did.

DAISY

Didn't know who the killer was last time. This time it's simpler. And… And Basira's not a police officer anymore.

MARTIN

Oh. Look, y-you're sure it was him? I mean, I know, I know… but I can't… He wouldn't!

…

I… I don't think it was him.

DAISY

You think we should be looking for other suspects?

MARTIN

Wh– N-No! No, I mean, not – Look, that tape that we gave you…

DAISY

Has a lot of distortion, some screaming and a recording of you

seeing the body, you claim for the first time. Always suspicious when two suspects are each other's only alibi.

MARTIN

I told you that there was someone else there. It may…

DAISY

Which one should we be asking, by the way? The man with the knife hands or the woman trapped in your 'magic corridors'?

MARTIN

It. *Happened.*

DAISY

Well, if your witnesses appear back in this universe, maybe the situation will change.

Otherwise, it's an easy choice: answer my question or I pin it on you.

MARTIN

Y-You can't! Th-That's not how this works.

…

Is it?

DAISY

Let me tell you how this works, Mr. Blackwood. I've got a hell of a workload, no partner, and full operational discretion to make this whole situation go away. That means you help me, or I make things very unpleasant for you.

MARTIN

But you're the police!

DAISY

So, help me stop a killer. Where is Jonathan Sims?

MARTIN

[Pause] I don't know.

DAISY

Don't lie to me.

MARTIN

I don't!

DAISY

Everyone I've talked to says you and him were close.

MARTIN

What? *[Inordinately pleased]* Did they? I mean… I mean, who said that? I, I, I guess, I mean, more than the rest, yeah okay, but –

DAISY

Did he have any **other** friends? Anyone outside the Institute he might have talked to?

MARTIN

I… No, I don't really… think so. I don't, don't think he had much of a life outside of this place.

DAISY

There's nowhere? No-one he might turn to?

MARTIN

He never talked about his friends, worked all hours… No. I'm sorry.

DAISY

[Sigh] Right. Get lost. Send Stoker in.

MARTIN

That's it?

DAISY

Unless you know something else.

MARTIN

What about Sasha?

DAISY

[Sigh] No sign of her body here or in the tunnels. No evidence she was the victim of violence. Maybe she saw the murder, or caught Sims smashing up the storage room, and took off. Maybe she's with him. Or he killed her, too. Either way, quicker I find him, the better for her, so if there is anything you're not telling me…

MARTIN

No. I just… Bring her back safe, okay?

…

I'll send Tim in.

[DOOR OPENS]

[DOOR CLOSES]

DAISY

Tim Stoker.

…

That your name?

TIM

Yeah.

DAISY

You want me to leave this running?

TIM

No. You can turn it off.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

DAISY

Hm.

TIM

Huh. Seems about right. Look, just… just leave it on, or do you want to do this somewhere else?

DAISY

It's fine.

TIM

Suppose you want my statement?

DAISY

I just need anything you know on the possible whereabouts of Jonathan Sims. Anywhere he feels safe, any friends or associates he

might turn to?

TIM

No.

DAISY

You're sure? Nothing that might help me find him? If you're hiding something out of some sort of loyalty…

TIM

[Bitter laugh] Look, if I knew, I'd tell you. We haven't talked too much lately.

DAISY

And you haven't seen Sasha James either?

TIM

No. You think she's dead?

DAISY

Can't say yet. But looking at it, yeah, I think Sims killed her, too.

TIM

Sounds right. More bodies for the archive.

DAISY

You've got quite a turnover. Anything you want to tell me about it?

TIM

[Snort] Yeah, don't take a job here.

DAISY

Oh… *[amused grunt]* You're done, Mr. Stoker. Send in Bouchard.

[DOOR OPENS]

[DOOR CLOSES]

DAISY

Elias Bouchard?

ELIAS

Correct.

DAISY

Sit.

[CHAIR SHIFTS]

ELIAS

So, what can I do to help? You want my account? My sworn testimony? My statement?

DAISY

What is…? No. Just a couple of questions.

ELIAS

Of course.

DAISY

I don't suppose you know how to turn this off?

ELIAS

Oh, leave it running. I'm sure John will want to review the tapes when he gets back.

DAISY

So you don't think he did it?

ELIAS

Killed a man in cold blood? Certainly not. He doesn't have the stomach for it.

DAISY

People can surprise you.

ELIAS

In John's case, I rather hope so.

DAISY

You want him to be a murderer?

ELIAS

Have you had any luck identifying the body yet?

…

Well?

DAISY

I'm the one asking the questions.

ELIAS

Very well, then I suppose this interview is over. Unless you care to arrest me?

DAISY

[Pause] The victim isn't someone we have on file. Doesn't match any missing persons. Still a John Doe.

[ELIAS CHUCKLES]

I say something funny?

ELIAS

Nothing. Just remembering an old joke.

DAISY

Right. So. Do you know anything about the current whereabouts of Jonathan Sims? Anywhere he might be staying? Any friends he might have contacted?

ELIAS

I do.

DAISY

…

Well?

ELIAS

I was wondering. Is it worth it? Operating the way that you do?

DAISY

Just answer the question.

ELIAS

Does the lack of oversight make up for the lack of support?

DAISY

What do you know about the current whereabouts of Jonathan Sims?

ELIAS

Everything. I know exactly where he is and who is with him. But I don't think I'm going to tell you.

DAISY

I can drag this down to the station if you want, you weird little freak. Maybe Sims didn't do this alone.

ELIAS

Please, Detective Tonner. You don't want this to happen in the police station any more than I do.

Your superiors, exactly how aware are they of what you're doing right now?

DAISY

They know enough. They got a call and sent me down here. That's how it works.

ELIAS

And then they don't ask any questions, as long as you keep it far away from official police channels.

Except your partner leaving has made you sloppy. No notes, no proper interrogations, no back-up of any sort. You've barely collected a scrap of evidence from the scene, and made no official record of the dozens of interviews you've done with the Institute staff. You haven't even followed up on any of the other potential suspects or leads, and shown no interest at all in the fate of Sasha

James.

All you care about is where John is, because **you've** decided on a course of action, and you're going to follow it through.

DAISY

…

If you're right, what's to stop me kicking your teeth in? No cameras down here, remember. I can always just turn off that little recorder of yours. Smash it up.

ELIAS

Very true. However, you aren't going to do that, Detective. Because of Calvin Benchley.

DAISY

What?

ELIAS

Calvin Benchley. You recognise the name, don't you Alice? You see, I know what you did.

DAISY

I… don't know what you're talking about.

ELIAS

No? The scar may have faded, but you haven't forgotten.

Did it itch, just a little, when you were burying him?

DAISY

You shut the hell up, or I swear I'll kill you.

ELIAS

A genuine threat, I'm sure, but right now what you're really trying to figure out is, if I have any evidence that could make it back to your people. It seems impossible, of course – how could I? But you just don't know. So many impossible things happen in here, in this strange, musty place.

DAISY

Shut up!

ELIAS

Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to make a statement. Your statement. To prove to you what I know, and because I want John to hear it someday. And when it's over, you are going to leave. Because if you don't, I'll make sure your superiors know all about every nasty little thing you've done in the name of peace and order, and I'll make sure they are subject to the scrutiny they so desperately want to avoid. More importantly, I'll make sure they know it has all been exposed because of you. Is that clear?

…

I will take that as a yes.

If you're smart, you'll go back to the police station and put forward some half-baked cover-up for what happened to your mystery corpse and leave it at that. But I don't think you are smart, so in many ways I'm excited to find out what you do next.

…

Statement of Alice Tonner, regarding the crimes and death of Calvin Benchley. Statement never given.

DAISY

Don't.

ELIAS (STATEMENT)

Everyone calls me Daisy. I like that because it sounds so gentle, and I'm the only one left who knows about the scar on my back. It doesn't really look like a daisy, more like a starburst, but it's what the doctor said when I got it, so that's how I've always seen it. It makes me feel strong, to know that the soft nickname everyone calls me comes from a bloody wound. And I like to feel strong. To be in control.

DAISY

I'm going to kill you, someday.

ELIAS (STATEMENT)

When I was eleven, I had a best friend, and his name was Calvin Benchley. We didn't hang out at school much because his friends said I couldn't play with them because I was a girl. But every day after getting home we'd go to the nearby park and play. It was small, just a scrap of grass and dirt, but if you hopped the fence to the south you could get into the cemetery, and if you went the other way you got into an old building site. The fence on that side was broken and jagged, but it collapsed enough that it was easy to climb over it, into the half-built structure.

Our parents had forbidden us from playing there. It was collapsing, as well as being a known hang-out for vagrants and druggies. We would take turns daring each other to go in there. That day, I dared him. That's why it was my fault.

DAISY

Shut up. It wasn't my fault.

ELIAS (STATEMENT)

We had been in the park, when there had been shouting from the building site. Crashes. Violence. Then a long silence.

I dared him to take a look, and when he didn't want to, I started making fun of him. So in he went. When he didn't come back, I decided he was just trying to spook me. But after fifteen minutes I decided he wasn't. I wanted to run away and get my mum, but I was frightened of getting in trouble, so instead I followed Calvin over the fence.

Inside were the first two dead bodies I had ever seen. They looked like they had attacked each other with broken glass. One lay impaled on a broken bottle, still holding the long shard of glass that jutted out of the other's throat. There was blood everywhere. I felt a rush of fear, and a strange sort of excitement.

DAISY

You can't know that.

ELIAS (STATEMENT)

On a broken staircase above them, stood Calvin staring at me with vacant eyes. Standing behind him I saw something. A hunched figure. I think it was naked. I couldn't see anything except pale flesh and the vivid red of cuts and injuries. Every inch of its body appeared to be covered in open wounds, but no blood seemed to flow from them.

The thing was utterly still, save for a lipless, scabby mouth, which moved so fast it was almost a blur, silently mouthing words that only Calvin could hear. I know they were for him, because with each movement of its jaw, the thing's long, pointed black tongue would shoot out and flick itself into his ear. He was completely expressionless as that crooked, cut-up figure whispered to him and flicked at his ear with a barbed tongue.

DAISY

No.

ELIAS (STATEMENT)

Then Calvin's eyes turned to me. Without hesitation or expression he began running, sprinting right at me. I tried to get away, but he was faster, and slammed into me, pushing off my feet and into the rusted fence behind me. There was an explosion of pain in my back, as jagged metal embedded itself in my shoulder, and then it went dark. The last thing I remember before the hospital was the fierce pride on Calvin's face as he stood there.

No-one believed me about what happened. Calvin said that I had tripped and fallen, and that was the story everyone accepted, but after that he was different. Moody. He started getting into fights. Everyone just assumed he was turning into a teenager, but six children at my school were seriously injured or killed by the time he left for university.

All accidents, of course, nothing that would have pointed to him. But I was always careful around him, the daisy-scar on my back a constant reminder that we were not friends, that he was no longer to be trusted. I told people, but he seemed to feed on the uneasy glances of his classmates, and took great pleasure in scaring them further.

Even after school, I kept an eye on him but I couldn't believe he had never been arrested. I later got a look at his file and found out that he had been, but they'd never been able to make anything stick. He was smart and careful. We once almost nailed him for aggravated assault, but the victims changed their story and said they were the

ones who attacked him.

DAISY

You've made your point.

ELIAS (STATEMENT)

Six years ago, Calvin Benchley became the first human being I murdered. I beat him round the head as he was coming out of a bar, drove him to my usual spot and shot him five times in the chest with a handgun taken from the evidence lock-up. He didn't beg for his life. He didn't say a word. I don't think he even recognised me. He was harder to get rid of than the vampires, but I managed it.

And nobody asked any questions at all. He was a scumbag, and nobody wants to risk getting a Section 31. He was the first human I dealt with like that, but he certainly wasn't the last.

ELIAS

Do I need to go on, Detective Tonner?

…

Good. Feel free to see yourself out. If you take any action against myself or this Institute, I will ensure the police become aware of your crimes in a way that cannot be ignored or covered up.

I leave the matter of Jonathan Sims up to you, though I will not tell you where he is. I suggest you close the case and move on, but if you find yourself unable to do so, my advice is to kill him quickly.

There's no telling what he might be capable of.

[CHAIR MOVES AND DOOR OPEN.]

DAISY

One day, someone is going to kill you. I really hope it's me.

[DOOR SLAMS]

ELIAS

Good day, Detective.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

MARTIN

– but she looked like she'd seen a, well, you know…

TIM

So?

MARTIN

So, I'm just saying, she spends all that time in there with Elias, and

then leaves like that? Maybe he told her something.

TIM

Or maybe she just hates it here. Like a normal person.

MARTIN

Maybe they said something about Sasha, y'know?

TIM

She's dead, Martin. Come on! Even *you're* not that blind. He got her, too.

MARTIN

Don't you say that. Don't you *dare* say that!

TIM

I didn't. It was that detective. Y-You try talking to her about it?

MARTIN

She didn't care. Just wanted to know where he was.

TIM

Makes sense.

MARTIN

No. No it doesn't! Nothing about this makes sense!

I don't know who that old man was, but John would *never* hurt Sasha.

TIM

Fine. If it wasn't him, it **must** have been that thing we saw.

MARTIN

It was only for a second. And what with that weird finger guy, and the door… I mean, it d-didn't look like her.

TIM

It did. You **know** it did. Maybe it ate her. Maybe it was her. Maybe she was always some messed up mutant and we just never noticed. Could have been 'Michael'. I mean, it basically told us it was working with John. When you disappear and there are more than three different ways you might be dea–

Look, I'm sorry. It's just this place. *[Sigh]* Bad things happen and eventually you don't come back.

MARTIN

T-Tim…

TIM

I'm going to go lie down.

MARTIN

Tim, we've got to talk about this!

[DOOR OPENS]

[MARTIN SIGHS]

Huh. *[Calling after]* Tim? Tim, did you turn the reco–

[CLICK]

MAG083 – Drawing a Blank

Statement #0131910

[CLICK]

GEORGIE

Sure, I just – Why?

ARCHIVIST

I just do. It's, it's my job. I record them.

GEORGIE

The job you just lost.

ARCHIVIST

Uh… yes.

GEORGIE

That one you lost so badly it somehow cost you all your stuff?

ARCHIVIST

Well, it's not quite that simple.

GEORGIE

Well, how am I to know?

ARCHIVIST

Look, Georgie, it's not… You don't need to worry. I mean, I'm not, I'm not on drugs or anything.

[GEORGIE LAUGHS DISBELIEVINGLY]

What?

…

I could be on drugs!

GEORGIE

Sure. I just… I know that you get obsessive about stuff, and this right here, I… I'm guessing someone dragged you into something weird, you got hooked in and then it all went wrong.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, that is almost exactly what happened.

GEORGIE

So what you need now is… distance.

ARCHIVIST

You're right. You're right. I just… I need to record it.

GEORGIE

No, you don't. This *[paper rustles]* is not going to help. It's part of the problem, isn't it? Look me in the eyes and tell me that it's not part of the cult or whatever the hell it was that left you homeless.

…

[Sigh] Come on. What's it been, four days?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[Softer] Yeah.

GEORGIE

It drops through the letter box and you spend four days… like this. It's not – It isn't right, John. You don't sleep…

ARCHIVIST

I've been investigating.

GEORGIE

Hmm.

ARCHIVIST

Please, Georgie, I just need… I need to record it. That's all. Then it's done.

GEORGIE

…

Fine. Fine… But you have got to deal with whatever this is.

ARCHIVIST

I will. I, I promise.

GEORGIE

Okay. And just so you know: not keen on your weird stalkers knowing my address. Not keen on that.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[DOOR CLOSES]

Right.

[CLEARS THROAT]

Statement of Chloe Ashburt, regarding a new window display at Fanton's department store in Hammersmith. Original statement given 19th October 2013. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Hea–

Audio recording by Jonathan Sims.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Working in a large department store can be kind of strange. I've had jobs in a couple over the last few years, and talked to people who've worked in others, and they all seem to operate slightly differently.

Some treat every department almost as a separate business, with its own dedicated team, some move their workforce around regularly, so they don't get too comfortable. A few operate almost entirely by leasing out spaces to specific companies, like the individual perfume or makeup counters, so you have an array of small, isolated teams on their little island of product.

I personally prefer the second sort, as it gives me an opportunity to work with a lot of different people and products, and I have a tendency to get… bored if everything gets too samey for too long.

So Fanton's worked pretty well for me, at least at first. I mean, it's not like customer service is my passion; the public is a moaning, dreadful bunch, but it was only a part-time job to put me through art school, and my colleagues were mostly a decent lot.

What I did enjoy, and what I tried to be involved in every time it came up, were the displays. I was mainly studying illustration, but I'd always had an interest in design more generally, so when the seasons turned and we changed up the displays in the windows and on the shop floor, I always made a point to try and be on the team helping to set them up. My line manager, Lana, knew this and

generally let me do so.

I'm not sure I actually sped things up, to be honest. I'm a bit of a perfectionist, and between posing and dressing the mannequins and setting up the props, I think I probably delayed the whole process more than a bit, but everyone was very patient with me as I directed them on how I thought they should assemble the bits I couldn't easily reach.

I sometimes wonder whether, if I'd left this display alone, or even let Lana do it, things might have turned out differently, but in the end it is what it is, and I'm just going to have to live with it.

This was about a month ago, just as we were starting to put out the autumn displays. These are always my favourites because, aside from the obvious duffle coats and Hallowe'en stuff, the slightly more… unexpected or avant-garde displays tended to be up over the autumn.

The theme for this particular one was 'Nights at the Circus'. There were acrobat mannequins in hoops, a rather well-made paper maché lion and the centrepiece: a mannequin set up like a ringmistress, dressed in some of the more theatrical clothes that Fanton's was selling that season.

Topped with a bright red top hat and clutching a whip, it created rather a striking effect; I spent longer than I should have trying to get it absolutely perfect. When it was done, though, I knew it had been worth it. The shiny blank face stared out from below the vivid

red, and the hand clutched the whip at such an angle it seemed as though the smooth plastic flesh might leap to life any second with a crack.

There was one other reason I quite enjoyed working at Fanton's, and that was it gave me ample opportunity to practise my figure drawing. Because of my classes I tended to end up working the later shifts, and Lana would usually let me stay past closing time, where I would spend hours drawing and redrawing each static figure – the different poses and costumes and displays gave me fantastic practise. It was almost meditative. I'll always be grateful to Lana for letting my do that – a lot of the higher-ups were kind of arseholes about it, hiding behind faux-concern that "my condition made closing up on my own potentially dangerous", but Lana, to her credit, ignored them and we never had an issue. Well, not that sort of issue, at least.

So obviously, once the 'Nights at the Circus' display went up, I spent several evenings drawing and redrawing it, copying every curve of the almost featureless face, the line of the limbs, the poise of the feet, over and over until I got it right. So when I came in one day to find that the ringmistress mannequin had been replaced, I knew instantly. It was wearing the same clothes, certainly, and was posed the same way, but I could see the difference.

If I hadn't known it in such detail, I never would have noticed. Certainly no-one else mentioned it, and when I asked Lana if there'd been a change, she just gave me a blank look. I was sure, though. The arms were just a little bit longer, the neck ever-so-slightly

twisted,and the face, where before there had just been the faintest hint of a nose and a slight smile, was almost completely blank, save for a small patch of broken plastic near its forehead.

Sometime after I had left the previous night, someone must have snuck in, undressed and removed the mannequin already there, and put the clothes on this new one before replacing it in the exact same position. It didn't make any sense.

I thought about trying to bring more attention to it, but nothing had been stolen, and the changes were so small that, even if I could convince them, what were they going to do about it? So I kept quiet. I was working in the soft furnishings department that week, and the mannequin was down in Womenswear, so I didn't see it that much. Even so, any time I had an excuse to go past it, I made sure I did. There was something about this new one, something in the way it didn't quite fit with all the other figures on display, the way it held the whip in cruel, sharp fingers. And the way its head never moved, but somehow I couldn't shake the feeling that it was watching me right back.

Disconcerting as it was, there wasn't really anything I could do about it, and after a few days I was starting to get used to the replacement. I had almost convinced myself I was overreacting, if not actually mistaken, when I was called in to Lana's office, just as I got into work.

Her expression was stern, and she told me to close the door behind me when I came in. She asked me if I'd stayed late the night before,

after closing time, and I told her yes I had. I started to talk about what I'd been drawing, but she held up her hand to stop me. She asked if I had done anything other than that, whether I had tried out "any other artistic pursuits". I was confused and told her as much, and she asked me if I'd seen anyone else there last night and I said no I hadn't. Then she asked if I'd messed with any of the displays and once again I said no.

She sighed, and I couldn't tell whether it was in relief or exasperation, but she opened her desk drawer and retrieved some printouts. They were photos of one of the autumn displays. I had noticed on the way in, when I'd gone past that particular window, which had previously been showing off raincoats, I believe, it had been empty. In the picture, however, it was not.

The raincoat mannequin had, it seemed, been… disassembled, then rebuilt into a tangled bunch of limbs and joints. The torso was upside down and the two arms jutted out from the front and back of the pelvis, bending up to hold the mannequin's head aloft. It had been dressed in an assortment of lurid red and purple shirts from our pyjama range, and someone had clearly stolen some paints from the craft department and daubed a colourful, smiling face on top of the blank space that had previously been there. They had finished it with a red pompom crudely glued onto the top of the head. The effect was alarming and put me in mind of a clown.

I looked up to see Lana's eyes staring into me, acutely scrutinizing my reaction. The confusion and mild horror on my face seemed to put her a little bit at ease, but she was still a long way from relaxed.

I told her it wasn't me, that I had no idea who would have done it or why, that I definitely didn't see or hear anything out of the ordinary, all the standard excuses. She nodded, though it was clear nothing I said was really helping the situation. Finally, I asked about CCTV, and she shook her head. There hadn't been any focused on the vandalised display, and whoever had done it had clearly known enough about the camera placements to avoid them. Another reason, apparently, they suspected it was done by someone who worked there.

We went back and forth for about ten minutes, until at last she said she believed me, and wouldn't pursue disciplinary action, but without any other credible explanation there was no way she could keep letting me stay behind alone. Not least because, technically, she shouldn't even have been doing it in the first place. I was upset, of course, but I also realised I was getting off comparatively lightly, so I didn't make a fuss.

The next couple of weeks were difficult. Drawing the displays in the shop had helped me centre myself, gave me some positive associations with the place. Without it, Fanton's was just where I worked. And more importantly, somewhere I constantly had to deal with the public, all their rudeness and stupidity and fake pity. To be honest, I was finding it harder and harder to keep my patience.

There was something else, though. Without being able to rely on me to close up, Lana had assigned it on a rota to the others in our team. Nobody really wanted the job, and a few of them moaned to me privately, but they didn't exactly have a say in the matter. But as

the days went by I noticed that some of my colleagues were getting nervous, jumping at little noises and glancing over their shoulder. It always seemed to be the person who'd been closing up the night before. And through it all that ringmistress stood there, malicious and unmoving, brandishing her whip ready to strike.

Finally it happened. Last Wednesday, Lana couldn't find anyone else to do the last shift, Jan had a doctor's appointment, Liam had a family emergency… you get the idea. Lana was going to have to do it herself. I'd been working very hard over the days prior to get back in her good graces, and I managed to convince her to let me do the last shift with her, and stick around to do some drawing while she locked up, promising that I'd be out of the door as soon as she was. She reluctantly agreed.

So Wednesday rolled around, and the day went very much as normal, maybe a bit quieter than usual, but not so you'd notice. There was a slight… something in the air though, an anticipation. I thought at the time it was me, since I'd decided to use this opportunity to try and exorcise some of the feelings of unease and finally draw the mannequin that was making me so uncomfortable. But now I don't think I had anything to do with it at all.

Everything was closed up, everyone else had left. It was just me and Lana. And she was making the final checks to lock up. I ran to the changing rooms and grabbed the small bag from my locker that contained my pencils, inks and paper, and then hurried back and over to the womenswear department. I couldn't hear Lana anywhere, which is strange as she usually provided something of a

running commentary, but I didn't really notice.

Then I rounded the corner of one of the aisles and stopped dead: the mannequin was gone. The pedestal where the 'Nights at the Circus' display had stood was empty, save for a torn pile of paper maché and the headless figure of a plastic acrobat.

I stood there, my mouth hanging open, as I tried to figure out what was going on. Had Lana done this? Was this all some elaborate ploy to frame me for… something, vandalism? That didn't make any sense. The store around me was still and silent, and it felt as if all I could do was wait for something to happen. And sure enough, after a minute or two, I heard Lana's voice calling to me.

Except it didn't sound quite right. There was a strangled, hoarse quality to it, like the words were being pushed out against her will. I was terrified of what I would see when I reached her, but my only other option was to run, and if she was in trouble, I'd never forgive myself. I pulled out my phone and pressed 999, my thumb hovering over the call button as I approached the storeroom where Lana's voice was coming from. The door's small window was too high, so I just had to push it open. It was so heavy against my shaking hands.

The room was dark on the other side. I reached up to turn on the lights, but the switch flipped uselessly back and forth. The light from the door illuminated a few boxes of leggings, but I couldn't bring myself to go any further in. Just beyond the light from the door I could see a figure, tall and thin. It could have been Lana, but I wasn't sure.

At least until it began to move. Its steps were jerky and stiff, arms snapping out and back as it moved towards me step by step. I felt my own limbs seize up at the sight, and my phone slipped uselessly from my hand. The faceless figure loomed over me, and when it bent down, the finger it placed upon my lips was cold, hard plastic.

“Shhhhh…” it said. Though it had no mouth to form the sound.

The next thing I remember is the police. I must have pressed dial before I dropped my phone. They found what was left of Lana further into the storeroom. I was questioned for a while, but much to the dismay of tabloid headlines everywhere, it became clear quite quickly that there was no way I could have done it. The CCTV showed me almost constantly during the period Lana would have been killed, and the only blood on me was a single, neat line across my lip.

Of course, that’s not to say the police believed my version of events either. They are currently working on the theory that a killer had been stalking the store for a while, and finally chose that night to strike, but they didn’t expect me to still be there, and fled when it was clear I’d called the police. But I know. I remember. Sometimes I wake up in the night, and I can taste the blood and plastic of that stiff and lifeless hand.

Statement ends.

ARCHIVIST

As I have discovered in the few days since this statement arrived, it

is far harder to conduct a thorough investigation without the resources of the Institute or the… expertise of my assistants. I have located a few stories about the death of Lana Billings, found… strangled and partially skinned in the storage of Fanton's department store, but the rather lurid newspaper coverage is as much as I could find, and it gives no further information of use.

Well, that's not quite true. The *Express* illustrates their story with a picture of the service entrance to Fanton's, the entrance the killer is assumed to have used to access the storeroom. I do not know whether this picture was taken before or after the crime, or whether it's a stock photo, but I cannot help but notice, parked just at the edge, is an off-white delivery van. The resolution is not high enough to make out the name on the side, but I'm not sure I need to.

I've had little luck in tracking down Ms. Ashburt herself. I managed to find a legal transcript from 2011 regarding a wrongful dismissal case she brought against a previous employer, the firing she claimed as being motivated by her dwarfism, but none of the parties involved had any up-to-date information on her. Something of a dead end.

There are some connections here, though what they might mean I… I just don't know. Circuses, skin, things just a few degrees off from human. The mannequin, I would assume, has some connection to this 'Stranger' being. The same one we've… had such problems with already.

Breekon and Hope… might also be connected to it. I recall they

made a delivery to a taxidermy shop in a previous statement, I think, which brings us back to skin. Not to mention more than one witness has described them as… as uncanny, not quite seeming like real people. Until I am more certain of the identities of the other powers out there, I am going to assume Breekon and Hope are at least working with, if not part of, the Stranger.

Of course, the biggest mystery to this statement is who sent it to me. And why? There's no return address and, something I'm glad Georgie didn't spot, no postmark. Which means it was delivered by hand. Does someone from the Institute know where I am, or is it someone else?

And why **this** statement? It links in with a lot of what I'm already looking into, but if there are any revelations in it, I can't find them. Or is it a warning? Emphasising that if I simply wait and see what happens, if I don't act on what I know, then someone I care about may pay the price. If that's the case, then I think… message received. Hiding won't bring any answers, and it won't stop whatever's going on. I'm going to keep looking into where this statement came from, but it wasn't sent in vain. *[Sigh]* I've got work to do.

Recording ends.

[CLICK]

MAG084 – Possessive

Statement #9900112

[CLICK]

MARTIN

Right. Er, Martin Blackwood, Archival Assistant at the Magnus Institute, recording statement number… 9900112, statement of Adrian Weiss, given December 1st 1990.

Statement begins.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

When I was about ten or eleven, my parents moved us from Ipswich out to a small village in Suffolk called Cratfield. I'd tell you what the nearest notable town was, but there really wasn't one. Nothing much near us at all. It was open and rural and, the way I saw it, absolutely filthy. I was used to the dirt and grime of a city, so all that manure and rot that gave the countryside it's particular odour made me feel like I could never quite get clean.

Still, I was happy enough to be living there. My school in Ipswich had been very difficult, for reasons I'd rather not discuss, and I had no friends to speak of that I was leaving behind. For all the isolation and muck out there, I still felt like I appreciated the fresh start.

The village kids were an insular lot, but they accepted me much quicker than I had expected. I guess they couldn't really be picky – a place that small, you end up hanging out with all sorts of kids that you wouldn't normally look twice at.

That's how I met Gordon. Gordon Goodman. He never really felt like he fit the name. He was about fourteen, a bit older than most of the other kids by a couple of years, but still one of the smallest, barely five foot two and scrawny as anything. His hair fell over his eyes, and you always had to ask him to repeat himself, because whenever he started talking it was so quiet that you'd miss the first part. I liked him, though. He wasn't someone who'd judge you; he just took everything in stride.

Now, near the edge of Cratfield, at least as much as it had a clear edge, was a field of about three acres that pretty much everyone avoided. It wasn't the sort of place that gets named on a map, so everyone around just called it 'The Dump', or occasionally 'Maggie's Dump' on account of an old woman called Margaret Carnegie, who owned the place and lived in a small bungalow right in the middle of it. Now Maggie was a classic recluse: hardly anyone had seen her for years, and those that had would only spot her in and around her little house, carefully piling up newspapers or stacking bottles.

Maggie was a hoarder, you see. No-one really knew where she got most of it, you didn't get much home delivery in those days, but she seemed to have a never-ending supply of food wrappers and magazines and old clothes. At some point she'd clearly run out of space in her bungalow, and started to store stuff outside. She never

weighed it down or tied it up or anything, so when the wind picked up it got spread all over the place, and so, gradually, the area became Maggie's dump.

Cratfield was a good ways away from the nearest actual rubbish tip, so it wasn't long before local families started to use it as well. Anything too big for normal collection got thrown out there: fridges, sofas, broken electrics. By the time I moved there, the area around Old Maggie's house was covered in junk, with stained white, broken appliances, dotted all over like blisters on grimy skin.

I learned all this from the other kids when they made fun of Gordon, who they called Maggie's 'little pet' or sometimes her 'rat butler'. You see, he was the one who delivered her food. I've no idea why his parents had taken on the responsibility of providing for her, she was probably a distant relation of some sort, but it was Gordon's job to bring her groceries every few days, winding his way through the filth that surrounded her isolated home.

Now Old Maggie fascinated me. Or rather, the stories about her did, because obviously there were stories. The two most common were that she was a witch, or that she'd killed her husband and chopped him up, keeping the land as messy as possible so nobody would think to dig him up. I never met anyone in town who remembered her actually having a husband, or course, but there were plenty of kids who claimed to have seen her creeping past their houses at night, or staring into their windows. Davey Morgan even said that she'd chased him through the woods with a knife, but we all knew he was a liar. Even so, the stories terrified me, and I loved them.

I never wanted to actually meet Maggie. I was far too scared of her for that. But, I used to love walking with Gordon while he took groceries to her. I'd see how close to her house I could get before I got spooked and ran home. I used the bigger bits of rubbish as markers. After a few weeks I could always make it past the broken red sofa, and the bravest I got was the washing machine without a drum, all the while picking my way past sodden newspaper and rusted cans.

Gordon, for his part, never seemed to mind. I reckon he was thankful for the company, as he would chat away softly to me as we walked, either ignoring or oblivious to my fear.

Whenever I ran back to the fencepost that marked the start of Maggie's Dump, and was therefore, in my mind, safe, I would turn back to watch as Gordon reached the bungalow. He'd press the little doorbell, and stand there waiting as the door swung open. I could see a figure stood there: long, white hair and a dressing gown the colour of rust. They would lead Gordon inside, and the door would shut behind them. I would never see him come back out.

I tried to convince myself he just needed to help her with chores, but deep down I knew she was doing something dreadful to him. My mind would conjure grotesque images of knives and bubbling cauldrons full of rotting food, and I'd generally scare myself so badly that I never ended up waiting for more than ten minutes.

Which, thinking about it now, is probably why I didn't see him come out. But, he was always at school the next day, alive and

unharmed. He'd just smile when I asked him what he did in there. He'd shrug and say she just wanted to ask him to stack stuff, but on those days I would notice that his fingernails were always stained, and slightly caked in dirt.

Then, one day in early October, Gordon didn't show up at school the next day. I'd walked with him the evening before, but I hadn't even made it to the washing machine. I'd seen him go inside, and now he was gone. Nobody seemed bothered, and one teacher said his parents had called him in sick, but I was certain: this time Old Maggie hadn't let him go.

I ran over to his house as soon as school finished, and knocked on the door. His father answered, and when I asked him where Gordon was, he told me he was up in his room with a fever. I asked to see him, but was told very firmly that he was asleep. I looked Gordon's dad in the eyes as he said this, and I knew that he was lying to me. If anyone was going to save him from Maggie's knife, it was going to have to be me.

The sun had almost set by the time I reached The Dump, and the bungalow seemed much taller, silhouetted as it was against the darkening purple sky, surrounded by the filthy, white corpses of unwanted electricals. But that wasn't right. Maggie wanted them. Maggie didn't want anything to be lost. She wanted them to stay, and rot.

You know, for all the fear Maggie inspired in me, I was completely unprepared to be right about her. Not the knife, I got the knife

wrong, but I do think that she was a witch. In the years since then I've tried very hard to convince myself that what I saw that night was a dream or a false memory or something, but… it wasn't.

I was past the washing machine before I'd even registered what I was doing, and when I realised where I was, I felt my legs begin to seize up. The lights in the house were on, dim through the filthy windows, and they cast a diseased yellow glow that refracted off a pile of clear glass bottles stacked outside. I don't know how I'd never noticed the smell of that place before, but now the stench of it hit me like a wave. I gagged, and fell to my knees, not wanting to put my hands anywhere on the litter-covered ground.

As I looked around desperately for a patch of actual grass which I could use to support myself, my eyes fell on something that seemed out of place: A pristine, unopened can of baked beans. The absurdity of it overcame my fear for just a second, and I steadied myself enough to get a closer look.

It stood upright, about two feet from a fallen grocery bag. One of the bags that Gordon always brought when he went to see Old Maggie. Behind it was another bag, and another, and another, until I saw, propped up against the back of the house, dozens, if not hundreds, of shopping bags. Some seemed to be almost new, while others had clearly been there for months. And all of them were full to the brim with unopened food.

I found myself reaching for the tin. I just wanted to touch it, to feel something clean and real to make sure I was still in the world. But

as my fingers brushed against it, the can began to shake violently. The metal bent and warped, like something inside was growing rapidly, bursting to be free. I fell backwards, now fully panicked, and started to crawl away as quickly as I could. The throbbing tin was nowhere to be seen now, but as I tried to get away, I felt the ground give way beneath my hand, and it was sucked down, up to the elbow in clinging muck.

Somehow, I managed to choke down a scream, and pulled my arm free, ripping soil and dead grass out in clumps. It was covered in a wriggling mass of earthworms, squeezing and pressing their slimy bodies against my skin. Still, I didn't scream, as I shook my arm wildly, flinging them away from me. My head was swimming, searching for something I could focus on, something normal, if only for a second.

What I saw instead was Gordon's face, staring at me from the mud, from the hole I had torn in the ground. His eyes were vacant, and his skin was marked and discoloured. Then I realised with a start that it was a mask, old newspaper and wet cardboard formed into a perfect recreation of my friend. A fleshy knot of worms slithered through the hole of its mouth. And then, all at once, my mind snapped back to Gordon's plight, to why I was there in that awful place.

The light was still shining through the grime of the bungalow windows, as I gingerly placed my foot on a pile of old newspapers and lifted myself up to get a look inside. My fingers gripped the edges of a windowpane slick with some sort of dark oil. It took a

moment for my eyes to focus on the figures inside, and even then they were blurred by the slime-encrusted glass.

I could see Gordon, sat in a thick, threadbare armchair, motionless. Bent over him was the thin, hunched form of Old Maggie. Tiny shapes moved over my friend's still form, as her thin hands smoothed pieces of ancient, yellowed paper over his face. Her dressing gown was wet, and her wrinkled skin glistened with a pale fluid that dripped from her fingers as she smoothed the strips in place. I could hear her singing a soft, crooning song, and as her voice got louder the things crawling over Gordon got faster and more agitated.

Then my foot slipped, and a glass bottle fell from its pile. It wasn't loud. It didn't even break. But that was all the excuse I needed to run. I don't know if she heard it, the mere idea that she might see me was enough to send me sprinting all the way back home to safety. When my mum saw the state of my clothes, she sent me to bed without dinner, which was fine by me. I crawled under the covers and lay there until sleep finally came.

Gordon was fine. He was in school the next day like nothing had happened, and we never spoke about it. He stopped delivering to Old Maggie, though. At least, I think he did. I lost touch with him about a year later, when my family moved again, this time to Liverpool. And I tried to convince myself that it had all been a dream.

I'd almost managed it, as well, until I found myself in Ipswich last

month on business. My drive home took me near to Cratfield, so I decided to pass through for old time's sake. I stopped at the White Hart for a coffee, and ended up chatting with some locals.

We talked about nothing for an hour or so, until someone mentioned offhand about having to swing by the dump with their old mattress. I asked him when Cratfield had gotten a dump, and he explained it was actually just a patch of old waste ground where folk tossed their rubbish.

Did it have a name, I asked, and he nodded, casually, like he had no idea that what he was saying mattered in the least. Sure, he told me, it was named for the weird recluse who owned the place. They called it "Gordie's Dump".

Statement ends.

MARTIN

[RAGGED BREATHING AS MARTIN REGAINS HIS COMPOSURE]

Well, I, er… I think that was okay. Er, yeah. To anyone listening, sorry about the change of tone.

John, the, uh, Head Archivist is… absent, so I'll be trying to fill in as best as I can. Um. Maybe Tim as well, if he… if he feels like it. It, It doesn't matter, I suppose. Just as long as it gets done.

Erm, I fol– *We* followed up on the address provided by Adrian Weiss, and… it… is a pretty unpleasant piece of land, owned by

Gordon Goodman. Records show he was bequeathed it by the last owner, Miss Margaret Carnegie, upon her death in 1982. Er, in fact he was her sole beneficiary, it looks like.

Miss Carnegie's death was listed as 'natural causes', most likely pneumonia, but it was apparently hard to be sure given the state of her body. Her lungs seemed to be full of newspaper pulp, and her back and sides covered in… you see, well, the report lists them as "cancerous growths", but the description… I mean, I mean, they sound more like insect legs. It also describes them as having "significant post-mortem autonomous motor function", which I'm guessing means they were somehow still moving.

Gordon Goodman is on record as the one who identified her body, and the corpse went missing the following night. Which leads me to wonder if maybe he didn't want to let her go, either. I mean… maybe he, um…

Oh, er, h-hold on.

[Distant] Er, excuse me? Excuse me!

[DOOR OPENS]

MELANIE

Oh, yes, hello?

MARTIN

This is… The Archives aren't actually open to the public.

MELANIE

Er, I know. There, there wasn't anyone on the door, though. I'm… I'm looking for the Archivist?

MARTIN

Ah. You're Miss, er… Richardson?

MELANIE

King.

MARTIN

King! Yes. Right.

MELANIE

Melanie is fine. Is he here?

MARTIN

Are, are… Oh, are you alright?

MELANIE

Oh, um, no. Not really. Got shot. Sort of. In India.

MARTIN

What?

MELANIE

Oh, it's, it's mostly fine now. I can walk on it, at least… It's what I wanted to talk to John about.

MARTIN

That's… not really… I mean, I guess I could take your statement?

MELANIE

Oh. Er. I suppose. You mean, you mean now?

Right.

[DOOR CLOSES]

Um, well… I… I flew out and I've been, well, that is, before that I was, I was looking at some books. Er, there were history books that were talking… Look, are you sure I can't just talk to John? You know, Jonathan Sims? He still works here, right?

MARTIN

Er, that's actually quite a good question.

MELANIE

Oh, okay. Look, I'm sorry, I've… I've obviously missed something here. What's going on?

MARTIN

[Long sigh] John's missing. And they… they think he killed someone.

MELANIE

[Short laugh] What, he finally snapped, did he? Or did he accidentally bore them to death?

MARTIN

I'm serious.

MELANIE

Oh. Oh right.

So, who'd he kill?

MARTIN

He didn't! It's just everyone –

Look, it was, it was an old man. No-one here knows him, and the police still can't actually identify the body, so…

MELANIE

So… what? He's supposed to have suddenly just murdered some stranger?

MARTIN

With a pipe.

MELANIE

What, like burned him to death, or…?

MARTIN

A metal pipe.

MELANIE

Oh! Sorry, I just pictured him with like a smoking… y'know? I mean, that, that doesn't sound like him, does it? I've only met him a couple of times, but beating an old man to death with a pipe seems kind of out of character.

MARTIN

Right? But everyone just seems totally convinced he did it. I mean, they think he did something to Sasha too.

MELANIE

Jesus. Which one?

MARTIN

Oh, uh, she was, um, another one of the research assistants, like me and Tim.

MELANIE

Yes, I know that, I meant –

MARTIN

She vanished around the same time as the murder, I think.

MELANIE

Oh, you know what, I am not doing this again.

MARTIN

You sure you're alright?

MELANIE

Yes! I just got… God, I'm kind of at the end, you know?

MARTIN

The end of what?

MELANIE

Everything. Friends, clues, savings. Everything. Options. There's nowhere left for me to go. I don't know why, but… I just, I just felt that perhaps coming here might help. And talking things out with John. I mean, I mean he's awful, but at least he listens, you know?

MARTIN

Yeah. I'm… sorry. Um, is there anything that I could, like, maybe do for you?

[DOOR OPENS]

ELIAS

[Distant] A friend of yours?

MARTIN

Oh, er, it's okay. She's, um, er, she's giving a statement.

ELIAS

[Coming closer] I see. Well, good to meet you.

Elias Bouchard, I run the Institute.

MELANIE

Melanie King.

ELIAS

Ah, you're not the Melanie King who runs *Ghost Hunt UK,* surely?

MELANIE

Used to.

ELIAS

Ah, of course. My apologies.

MARTIN

[Disbelievingly] **You** used to watch it?

ELIAS

I'm sorry to hear it's no longer running. Your techniques were rudimentary, but you showed surprising promise. On occasion.

MELANIE

Thank you… I think.

MARTIN

[Spluttering] Melanie was actually just leaving. Erm, I think we were done.

MELANIE

Uh, yes… yes.

ELIAS

One moment, Miss King. Martin has filled you in on recent events, I believe?

MELANIE

I mean, a, a bit.

MARTIN

Not everything.

ELIAS

Then you are aware there is currently a vacancy for an archival assistant?

MELANIE

Yes. And an archivist.

ELIAS

Oh, I don't think we need to worry about that just yet. But the assistant role…

MELANIE

Hang on, are you offering me a job?

MARTIN

What?

ELIAS

You have some experience in the field, I believe.

MELANIE

Well, yes, but…

MARTIN

I mean, that doesn't actually, er, make her qualified.

ELIAS

[Pointedly] Formal qualifications aren't everything, Martin.

Do you want the job, Melanie?

MELANIE

Oh… Um, I… Well, it's, it's rather sudden, but… er, I mean, sure. Yes. Yes, I do.

MARTIN

Melanie, I'm really not sure that you actually want to –

ELIAS

Problem, Martin?

MARTIN

No, er, no, no, I-I guess not.

ELIAS

Good. Well, if you want to come on up to my office and we'll have a proper interview. Hopefully get all the paperwork signed.

MELANIE

Lead the way.

[FOOTSTEPS HEAD AWAY]

MARTIN

[Non-verbal sounds of frustration] Great!

Great.

[CLICK]

MAG085 – Upon the Stair

Statement #376–U

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of an unknown figure, regarding an encounter that… may or may not have happened in their home. Date of original statement unclear, though paper quality likely puts it at between twenty and thirty years ago. Recording by Jonathan Sims… in his personal investigative capacity.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to put my words to you, and apologies for any problems that… may arise from this conversation. I will try to restrain it.

Are you familiar with the work of the poet William Hughes Mearns? I assume not. Few people are, even now I'm not completely sure that's how you pronounce his name, having only ever seen it written down. There is one poem, however, I think you will be familiar with. It goes thus:

> As I was going up the stair

I met a man who wasn't there!

He wasn't there again today,

Oh how I wish he'd go away!

When I came home last night at three,

The man was waiting there for me

But when I looked around the hall,

I couldn't see him there at all!

Go away, go away, don't you come back any more!

Go away, go away, and please don't slam the door…

Last night I saw upon the stair,

A little man who wasn't there,

He wasn't there again today

Oh, how I wish he'd go away…

It's called *Antigonish,* named after a town in Nova Scotia, home to the ghost of an old man who supposedly haunted the staircases of one of the grander homes. For the longest time I misread the title, and was convinced the poem was called 'Antagonish'. I thought it was a rather clever play on the word 'antagonist', owing to the ambiguous nature of the subject.

I was disappointed, then, to discover it was simply a reference to a haunting. By tying it to a real place and a known story, the strange, disconcerting nonsense at the heart of it was lost. Because nonsense is what it is. It is playfully impossible. He cannot *be* not there. But he is. He was. And so am I.

I didn't meet him on the staircase as well. The carpet didn't bend under the weight of his soft, round body, and I distinctly recall the absence of a creak as his foot pressed on the loose board of the empty fifth step. He laughed, but there was no humour it, because… then it would have had to break the silence. In the poem, I had always imagined a translucent figure, absent in life and body, but visible. But I couldn't see this man. Obviously I couldn't. I couldn't see him or hear him or speak to him. Because… there was nobody there. The staircase was empty, as he stretched his arm to gesture me closer.

My memory is not what it was. Some days it seems that damn poem is all I can remember. I know I had a family. I know I had a house. Was it in Antigonish? No, that's absurd. The man I didn't meet had nothing to do with the poem, just a, a coincidence. But I'm not sure… what else I know now; I'm not sure where else I know now. And I'm unsure where I've ever been. I had a home. A house. I know it had at least two floors, because there were stairs. The stairs were real. *He* wasn't there, but the stairs were. At least to begin with.

It was dark when I didn't see him, and I was about to walk up to bed. I remember being cold, damp. Had it been raining? No, the

water was still. I wanted to be dry, to be warm in my bed. And I couldn't, because in spite of his own absence, this man blocked the stairs. I think I would have asked others to tell me what or who they might or might not have seen, if that had been an option, and I didn't, so I must have lived alone. I don't know why the lights were off, but the moon was bright and cast stark shadows upon the empty floor where this figure stood.

For obvious reasons I can't describe him. I can barely describe his absence. I could try to say that his… hypothesis was tall and wide. Conceptually, he could have had arms that stretched away from a soft-looking torso, with stubby fingers that did not grip the banisters tight enough to splinter. If he had had a face, it would have been unremarkable, with a small, plump mouth that failed to quite turn into a smile.

He didn't speak, so I couldn't hear his offer to join him on the staircase. But I accepted. I don't know if I was just desperate to try and get up and into my bed, or if I was… generally curious as to what this man had to offer me, when he didn't even have enough wherewithal to exist. So I placed my foot on the first step and I began to walk. If he'd been there it might have been hard to get past his bulk, but as it was I continued up without any problems.

The staircase in my house was not long, and it wasn't steep, and it went straight up to the landing with only a single right angle turn. It was not a spiral staircase, so after walking down that corkscrew for almost a half hour, I knew it couldn't be mine. The man hadn't come with me, of course, so I wasn't able to ask how it was he

could always stay three steps in front of me without once moving his legs.

I walked and I walked. And then I didn't walk, and that got me moving much faster. The walls didn't look like my house, because there weren't any, so it was hard to tell what they did look like. Eventually I must have reached the end, because I woke up the next morning in my bed, and my bed was at the end of the staircase that was there, so I assume it was also at the end of the one that wasn't.

The next few days are hard for me to remember, because they happened, and genuine recollections slip through my mind like rippling glass. But the man didn't come back. He didn't come back every night. He didn't come back until I made… a horrid mistake. I called to him. I stood on the landing and shouted at him to go away. I asked him if he was there. I demanded he show himself. All utterly impossible, of course. I was shouting at nobody but myself, and so it was into my own mind that my curses and pleas burrowed and nested. As he wasn't there, I have no way of telling how many teeth were on show when he smiled at me.

After that, it became hard to tell where he failed to begin, and easier to tell where I ended. People would forget me, but that was alright, because only real people care about who remembers them. And I was no longer among their number. I would have whole days where I failed to exist, a feeling so entirely alien that I am glad I had no stomach from which to throw up. And as I existed less and less, the man ceased to exist less and less… until… I remember the first time he was really in my house, and I wished for nothing more

than that I had hands with which to strangle him.

My parents were the worst. They came for dinner once, shortly after I had called to him. They looked so confused when I served them their meal, and the conversations would die after only a few words. My mother's eyes were bloodshot, and I could see them unfocus when they tried to look at me. She dabbed a napkin at her mouth and asked me where her son was. I asked her what his name had been. She didn't know. She dabbed her mouth again and the napkin came away bloody.

My father said nothing, as I had taken him up the stairs an hour before, and he now lay dead in his chair, his heart unsuited for the expedition. He had sworn at me as he tried to climb them to the top, telling me I was no son of his, and I was trying to agree with him, but if I could have done so, then he would have been wrong. Eventually, after almost an hour descending the spiral, he keeled over in his seat and lay lifeless. My mother got abruptly to her feet, and told my father that they were leaving. My father got to his feet, and silently followed her out. I never saw either of them again.

Eventually, the man who had never set foot upon my staircase became real enough to have done this to me. He existed so thoroughly that he was finally able to laugh at the joy of being. He looked around for me, but of course I wasn't there, and in my absence I watched the realisation on his face that, in reality, whoever he was, he had died decades before. And he was now in reality. He tried to scream, but his throat decomposed around the noise, cutting it short with a slough of rotten flesh and collapsing,

brittle bone. And as I stared from the empty spiral staircase, I wanted to laugh right back at him. But I couldn't, because I just wasn't there.

I haven't been here for a long time now. Time is difficult. I try to take people up the staircase. Sometimes they make it, sometimes they do not. None of them have called out to me, though. Not like I once called out to an empty house. Most staircases are easy for me to not be on, but this one here took effort. I tried to be just real enough to talk to you. I wanted to share. I, I don't want to take you up the spiral staircase, so you should try to leave. I don't want to, but it's my nature now, and you can't fight what you are. Or even what you aren't.

> As I was going up the stair,
>
> I was a man who wasn't there.
>
> I wasn't there again today.
>
> Oh, how I wish I'd go away.

Statement ends.

ARCHIVIST

There are many aspects of this statement that I desperately want more information on, but I have no real way to do so. There are some short pieces of correspondence in the file, addressed to Gertrude, from someone called Eric Delano, confirming that while he typed out this statement, he has no memory of doing so, and

requesting some sick leave to address persistent migraines he has developed. There's no supplementary research because… what do you research? A nonsense poem from 1922?

No, I am more interested, as before, with who is sending me these statements, and why this one, especially as the message, if indeed there is one, seems to contradict the last one. If the… 'moral', shall we say, of Ms. Ashburt's statement was that ignoring the horrors stalking you just makes them more dangerous, then surely the message of this one is that confronting them directly is even more so. I suppose that leaves skulking around the periphery. *Which is what I was already doing!*

There is, of course, a different reading, which is that this is a targeted warning about trusting Michael, given the obvious parallels: swap out stairways for corridors and spirals for fractals, and there you go. The Nowhere Man thing is new, though. What was it Leitner said about the Spiral? It deals with fooling your senses, drawing your mind into difficult paths, making you doubt the reality you live in.

Well, if this is a warning about Michael, then it is, as before, somewhat superfluous. If I never see him – if I never see *it* again, it's too soon.

Maybe that's it. *It.* Maybe whoever sent this wants me to consider how many of these creatures used to be people. How many seem to have taken the mantle from the ones that came before them, and how none of them have been able to overcome their new natures.

How most of them don't even seem to think like people anymore. Given that there is every possibility I've taken one of these mantles myself, this is not an interpretation I'm keen on.

Or it could be someone in the Archives randomly sending me statements, with no curation, rhyme or reason. Assuming they come from the Archives. They're marked as Institute statements, but I have no idea who's sending them. I feel like I've been seeing a lot of police cars about, maybe… no, that's absurd. Maybe Leitner stole a lot of statements and had a, a sort of dead man's switch to… *[sigh]* Occam's Razor. For now, it makes sense to assume they're coming from the Institute, and they're only coming one at a time, so I will work on the belief that they are some way curated. So the current questions are who and why.

I feel bad staying put, like… like I might be placing Georgie in danger, but I don't have anywhere else to go at the moment, and if the increased police presence isn't just in my head, then I don't –

[DOOR OPENS]

GEORGIE

Right, I'm out tonight, ok? There should be some stuff in the freezer if you… Oh.

ARCHIVIST

I was just, uh…

GEORGIE

You didn't say we got another one.

ARCHIVIST

I didn't want to worry you.

GEORGIE

I knew it was something. You've been weird all day.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, I… I don't know.

GEORGIE

Yeah. Well, we can talk about it later. I need to head out.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. Yeah, y… you look great. What's the occasion?

GEORGIE

I have a date.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Oh! Do you need me to get out of the house for the night?

GEORGIE

[Laughs] Oh, no. Trust me, nothing's happening tonight.

ARCHIVIST

Oh… How are you so sure?

GEORGIE

Check out his profile.

ARCHIVIST

…

Good lord.

GEORGIE

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, he does know what a book *is,* right?

GEORGIE

Unclear. He climbs mountains, though.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, I got that. “Face to face with your own mortality on the frozen peaks, staring death in the face and saying ‘Not today, dude.’” The man’s a poet. And… why are you going out with him again?

GEORGIE

He, uh… he likes Hungarian food. And there's place just opened.

ARCHIVIST

You're serious? You're going on a date with… the Dullard of Skull Mountain, just so you have an excuse to eat a shopska salad?

GEORGIE

I need my sheep's cheese, John. No one else will go with me. You hate Hungarian food. Jeff says it tastes too "Soviet", apparently, whatever that means. Melanie says it's too salty. Everyone I know has bad taste in food.

ARCHIVIST

I don't *hate* Hungari–

Hold on. Melanie's back?

GEORGIE

You didn't hear?

ARCHIVIST

Hear what?

GEORGIE

Yeah, she… had a bad time in India. She got shot.

ARCHIVIST

She… what?

GEORGIE

Yeah, I know.

ARCHIVIST

Is she –

I, I mean, she survived?

GEORGIE

I hope so. I'm going for a drink with her on Thursday. Be a bit awkward if not.

ARCHIVIST

Right…

GEORGIE

I'd take you along but, y'know, she thinks you're a dick.

ARCHIVIST

Another startling insight from the piercing investigative mind of Georgie Barker. Is she alright?

GEORGIE

Well, she's had a hell of a time. Figured the least I could do was get her drunk and listen to her bitch about the new job.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, she found something, then?

GEORGIE

Yeah. Didn't say what. I think she was a bit embarrassed, says her co-workers are super weird.

ARCHIVIST

Really? Really. Well, er, speaking of weirdos, I think you have a Hungarian mountain man to be courting.

GEORGIE

Yes I do. I'll see you later. Don't forget the freezer.

ARCHIVIST

I won't. Have fun.

GEORGIE

Eh, we'll see.

[DOOR CLOSES]

ARCHIVIST

Hmm? Oh.

[CLICK]

MAG086 – Tucked In

Statement #9830203

[CLICK]

TIM

[Sigh] Statement of… uh, Benjamin Hatendi… Hateendi? Regarding a… *[papers rustling]* a blanket. Dead friend. Monster. Regarding his unavoidable and gruesome end. How he tried to hide. He couldn't. Statement is from… 1983, March 2nd. And I guess… *[long sigh]* I guess *I'm* doing this one. Tim Stoker. Archival assistant… Archival *prisoner* at the Magnus Institute.

Statement.

"My parents never let me have a nightlight. I was always afraid, but they were ju–"

Ugh, this is stupid.

This is stupid. Look, if, if anyone's listening to this useless tape, it was stupid when John was doing it, and it's stupid now. I mean, I mean, just what's the point? We might as well be engraving them on wax cylinders.

[RUSTLING OF PAPERS]

Whoever is listening to this, right now: you're wasting your time. And if you work for the Magnus Institute, get out. If you can. I mean, that's what really pisses me off, you know, you spend so long getting used to a jo–

[DOOR KNOCKING]

Uh, come in?

[DOOR OPENS]

MELANIE

Hi… Tim, right?

TIM

Right.

MELANIE

I'm Melanie.

TIM

Right.

MELANIE

Melanie King?

TIM

I know who you are.

MELANIE

I… Did Martin not explain?

TIM

Yeah. Yeah, you work here now.

MELANIE

You sound thrilled.

TIM

It's not you. It's his fault. He didn't warn you properly, and now you're trapped here. With us.

MELANIE

Oh, is this, this whole 'you can't quit because of spooky magic' deal?

TIM

Yeah. You tried?

MELANIE

No. And I'm not going to. I need a job, and it's fine here. I like it. It's quiet.

TIM

Sure. If you ignore all the corpses. And the monsters. And the disappearances.

MELANIE

Oh, trust me, you'll find plenty of those elsewhere. If this whole 'give quitting a try' thing is meant to be some kind of subtle hint… I… I just feel like you two don't want me here.

TIM

We don't. Martin's not big on change. I don't want anyone to be here.

MELANIE

Well, thanks for making me feel like part of the team.

TIM

You're suspicious and resentful, right? Welcome aboard.

MELANIE

Good talk.

TIM

Wait. Tell me about the two Sashas.

MELANIE

Oh? What?

TIM

Martin said you were rambling about there being two Sashas.

MELANIE

Look, I don't, I don't know, I… um, well, the… the first time I came to give a statement, there was a young woman working here named Sasha, er, and then when I, when I came in again there was a different woman working here. And everyone called *her* Sasha as well, which… I didn't think it was too strange. I mean, i-i-it's a common name, but everyone kept saying they were the same person and, and they weren't. At all! John kept saying there'd only ever been one Sasha working there, but they were totally different. And everyone's been giving me really strange looks whenever I talk about it.

TIM

…

What did she look like?

MELANIE

What? Sorry?

TIM

The first Sasha. What… What was she like?

MELANIE

Uh, she was… um…

I don't, er… maybe I'm… I'm getting it wrong. I just… okay, I can't, er –

TIM

No. I… think I understand.

MELANIE

Well, can you explain?

TIM

…

Who am I even sad for?

MELANIE

I… I'm, I'm sorry… I don't, er…

TIM

Um… I'm, I'm going to lie down. Um. Can you record this for me?
[Papers rustling]

It's part of your job now, I guess. The tape's already running.

MELANIE

Sure. Sure thing.

[DOOR OPENS, CLOSES]

MELANIE

Uh, right. Benjamin Hatendi's account of… *[rustling pages]* oh for… a, a strange encounter. Er, statement date, March 2nd, 1983. Melanie King recording. Apparently.

So, uh… marker!

[SHE CLAPS]

Right. Here we go. Er…

MELANIE (STATEMENT)

My parents never let me have a night light. I was always afraid, but they were just that sort of stubborn which doubled down when I screamed or cried about something, instead of actually listening. So no matter how terrified I might have been, I would always end up sleeping in the dark.

I don't know why it was such a cornerstone of their vision to see me grow up strong, but even an adult they would tell me how they "helped me get over my fear of the dark". It was such a point of pride for them that I could never bring myself to tell them, to say that the fear never really went away. I've heard that being exposed to the source of your terror over and over again can help break its power over you, numb you to it, but in my experience it just teaches you to hide from it. Sometimes that might mean hiding in a

quiet corner of your mind, but sometimes it's literally a blanket.

It wasn't a specific blanket, either. I didn't have it from childhood, or carry it for security; it was just whatever was on my bed. Thin summer sheet or thick duvet, it didn't matter, as long as I could duck my head underneath it and curl into a ball, I was fine. Weirdly, the fact it was still pitch black when I was underneath those covers didn't bother me a bit. The darkness beneath the blankets was **my** darkness: it was warm and cosy. I trusted it. But that cold, hateful gloom waiting just beyond the thin wall of my sanctuary never really left my mind.

Eventually I grew up, like pretty much everyone, and as the years passed I forgot my childhood fear. The blanket was just there to keep me warm. Until last week.

The mother of an old friend of mine, Robin Patton, called me out of the blue. Now, at that point I hadn't really seen Robin in about three years, but she sounded close to panic so I listened. She told me she hadn't heard from him in almost a month, and was convinced something terrible had happened to her son. Apparently he lived alone, and I was the closest friend to Robin's address. She begged me to go over, and see if anything was wrong.

I feel a bit guilty about how long I put off going, although in the end I guess it didn't matter. Robin and I hadn't parted on bad terms or anything, he was just a bit dull, and I had no real wish to bring him back into my life. Still, I couldn't *not* check on him, not after that phone call. So, eventually, I drove the half hour over to his

cheerful suburban bungalow.

It was almost evening by the time I got out, and as I walked up to the front door I noticed that none of the windows were lit. I was reassured, though, when I saw a shape watching me from the kitchen. I couldn't really make it out, and it disappeared almost as soon as I'd seen it, but I managed to convince myself that it was Robin, probably wondering why I'd shown up at his door unannounced. I kept telling myself there was no reason to feel so uneasy. When I reached the front door, I saw it was open, and shadows spilled out of it like paint.

It wasn't open so wide that you could have seen it from the street, but it was immediately clear that something was very wrong with Robin Patton, and I already regretted getting involved. I expected the door to creak when I pulled it, but the hinges moved in complete silence. Inside, everything was gloomy, lit only by a few stray beams of sunset that had managed to slip in past the heavy curtains. There was no sign of any figure watching from the window, but something in the light made the shadows seem as if they were moving. Forwards and backwards, shifting to a beat that only they could hear. I fumbled for a moment or two, looking for a light switch, until I was able to flick the ceiling lights on and the shadows retreated back to where they should have been.

Inside, the place was an absolute mess. Robin had never been a tidy guy, but it looked like it hadn't been cleaned in weeks. A thin film of dust coated everything, and there was this rancid smell pervading the place, that I thought must have been coming from the

fridge. On the wall hung a calendar, still pinned to January. From the looks of things, he hadn't been living there in over a month. I was about to head out, and find a phone somewhere to call Robin's mother, and then maybe the police, when I caught another glimpse of movement. I saw through a crack in one of the doors that lead further into the house. This time it was a slow, languid motion, and I was absolutely sure that I'd seen it.

I called out for Robin, or for anyone who might be in there to respond, but I got nothing but that same thick silence. My heart was thumping so hard I could feel my legs shake as I approached the door. I pushed it open, and reached for a light switch on the wall. I found it, turned it on and… nothing happened. The room remained completely black, and for the first time in almost twenty years I began to feel that childish fear of the dark.

Thankfully, I always keep a heavy torch in the car, in case I break down somewhere at night, so I went to fetch it. The weight in my hand was reassuring and solid, as I walked slowly back and into the darkened room. In the light I could see this was Robin's bedroom. There was a small writing desk covered with papers, a large oak closet, a single bed missing its covers, and a door to a small en suite bathroom in the corner. As I went in, I noticed the dust in here wasn't as thick as in the rest of the house, and that the last entry marked on his desktop calendar was the 12th of February. Empty food packets and bottles were strewn about the room and piled up in the corner. It looked as though Robin hadn't left his bedroom in weeks. The rancid odour that I'd caught wind of outside was

stronger in here, and I no longer thought it was coming from the fridge.

Slowly and carefully I made my way towards the wardrobe. It was a stark, imposing thing: a good two feet taller than I was. The smell was making my eyes water, but I pushed through. Even if I knew what I was going to find inside, I felt like I had to open it, if only so I could accurately describe it to the police. So that's what I did. I gripped the ice-cold brass handle, took as deep a breath as I could endure, and opened the door to the closet.

The shape that slid out did not, at first, resemble anything I would have called human. It looked like a large, wet bag, glistening and slick, with a dark liquid that oozed from it onto the floor. I won't even try to describe the smell. It was only when I saw a shrivelled, nearly skeletal hand gripping the edge of the bag from the inside that I realised what I was actually looking at.

It was Robin, but when he had climbed into that cupboard he had taken the sheets from his bed. He had wrapped them tightly around himself as he sat in there, clutching them in what I can only assume was mortal terror. And now, in death, they had fused to him, his own putrefying fluids mixing with whatever gross liquid had soaked into that thick fabric. How long had he sat there waiting? Hours? Days? Had it been since the 12th, two weeks before I had come to check on him?

And as I stood there, in utter horror, the growing pool of dark liquid touched the tip of my shoe. That's it. **That's** the moment that I

believe it started for me. I don't know why particularly that moment fixates me, that there must have been dozens of other ways I called attention to myself. But even so, whenever I look back, I *cannot* shake the conviction that it was that moment I sealed my fate. Because I didn't watch where I put my feet.

I called the police at that point. They were very understanding, although once a search turned up nothing they didn't pay any attention to my insistence someone else had been in the house. For all the strangeness of it, there didn't seem to be any actual evidence of foul play, so I was really just offered some condolences, and sent on my way. They were the ones that called Robin's mother in the end, and to be honest I'm glad. I don't really think I could have handled that conversation.

And then it was over. Nothing for me to do but go home, and try to process what I was feeling, what I had seen in that dusty bungalow. And I thought I was doing okay. At least while the daylight held. But that night it came for me.

I woke up at 2:40 in the morning. I don't know why. There was no sound to disturb me, just a sudden and urgent need to no longer be sleeping. And as I opened my eyes I felt that old fear of the dark hit me again with such force my muscles began to seize up. I raised my head just enough to get a clear view of the door to my room, and I saw what I somehow knew I was going to see.

It was impossible to make out any details of the form that stood in the doorway, it was simply a patch of shadow even darker than the

night that surrounded it. A silhouette in the pitch black. At first I thought it was a trick of my eyes adjusting to the dark, but then it began to move. Its body was fat and bulbous, with no limbs or head, so when it came towards me it did so with a slow, undulating pulse along the floor. I could see its outside was covered in what might have been feelers or fleshy tubes, and as it gradually made its way towards me I could see them flicking out and spasming wildly, in what looked horribly like excitement.

Instinct, honed throughout my entire childhood, kicked in and I pulled the thick blanket I was under up and over my head. I gripped the edges close to my chest, weeping and muttering desperate prayers. I clung to it, my tiny island of safety and protection, not even daring to stick my arm out to grab my phone from the nightstand. Who would I have called, anyway? Who could possibly have been prepared to deal with something like this?

As my mind raced through the possibilities, I gradually began to realise that I could hear nothing from beyond the blanket, nor did it appear I had been devoured by whatever the thing in the darkness was. Very gently I poked my head out from my sanctuary. It was still there, looming in the doorway, utterly still. As soon as I saw it, though, it convulsed back into movement and started once again making its way towards me, painstaking and slow. I dived back under the covers, gripping them tighter than ever.

Another hour passed, and then two, but it was only when I poked my head out that the thing would move. As ridiculous as it sounds, it seemed that while I was under the covers it couldn't move. It

couldn't get me.

I stayed under the rest of the night. When the daylight began streaming in the next morning, I finally left the safety of my bed to see what had become of the thing. It was gone, unsurprisingly, and in its place there was simply a small patch of dark, foul-smelling water.

I wasn't quite ready to celebrate, though, and the following night proved me right. Because it came back. I woke again, and saw it start that twitching, torturous journey towards me. So back under the covers I went, heart racing, desperately trying to think through what might be happening to me. In retrospect it's odd that at no point did I even consider that I might be hallucinating. I never had *any* doubts that the thing was real. At some point I finally fell asleep, and I guess I managed to stay under that blanket.

That's been my life for the last week and a half. I wake up, gripped by terror of the dark, and hide under the covers from this thing that only comes closer when I leave their protection. It's been awful, obviously, but in the end it wasn't the gradual wearing down of my nerves that got me. If anything, it was the opposite. I got too comfortable.

Last night I woke up like before. I sensed it there, but as I raised the covers over my head, I realised that I wasn't worried. Fear had given way to routine. I lay there, warm and protected, and simply waited to fall back to sleep. But this time, what I felt instead was a sudden weight pressing down on the end of my bed. Whipping

tendrils began to smack and grasp against my flimsy fabric barrier. I could see that shape of absolute darkness looming over me, quivering with triumph. Then I heard a voice, crisp and clear, whispering.

And it said, “The blanket never did anything.”

I won’t describe what happened after that. You’ve taken plenty of photos of my back and shoulders already. To say it hurts is the least of its horrors. That thing will come for me again tonight, I know it will, and there is nothing that can protect me. I just thought sharing my story might help some other poor idiot in the future.

I miss my blanket. Hiding was always so much easier.

MELANIE

[DEEP EXHALATION]

[CLAP]

Marker.

Uh, statement ends.

Well, er, that was… I suppose this is what I do now. Um… there, there aren’t any photos in the file, er, certainly not of weird supernatural injuries. There’s a photocopy of a death certificate for Benjamin Hatendi – looks like Martin has highlighted the cause of death. Says “Unknown – possible biological agent. All samples

incinerated". It's dated as March 7th 1983, five days after this statement.

Then there are some old cuttings about Robin Patton. Profiles from magazines… um… *[papers rustling]* Oh, he must have been quite something in the hiking community. Ah, apparently he wrote a book. Something about the best natural pools and lakes for swimming. Yeah, mostly just background fluff, and pictures of the guy emerging topless from waterfalls. Hmm, wasn't bad-looking, before… well… that.

Er, anyway, er, doesn't look relevant.

I, I suppose that's it. Er, the only other thing in there is… a sealed Ziploc bag containing an old fabric tag. Fantastic. Looks like it might be from a mattress or a duvet, maybe. It's, uh, it's got some rather pronounced dark stains on the end. It's probably nonsense. It's **all** probably nonsense. But I'm going to keep it sealed.

Uh… I suppose… that's a wrap.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[SOUNDS OF A CAFÉ ENVIRONMENT]

ARCHIVIST

Thank you for meeting me.

MELANIE

Well, why wouldn't I? It's not like you're 'wanted for murder'.

ARCHIVIST

[SHUSHING NOISES]

Can you keep it down?

MELANIE

[Stage whisper] Sure, I'll just quietly sit here and become an accessory, shall I?

ARCHIVIST

You, you –

You know I didn't do it.

MELANIE

Oh. Oh, do I? Is that what I know?

ARCHIVIST

Alright. Why didn't you send the police, then?

…

If you genuinely think I'm a killer, why meet me?

MELANIE

W– I mean, it's not… it's not like you've got any reason to kill **me.**

ARCHIVIST

[NON-COMMITTAL SOUND]

MELANIE

Fine. I don't think you did it. But I still don't want to get caught up in whatever *it* is.

ARCHIVIST

Should have thought about that before you joined the Institute.

MELANIE

What is the deal with you people? Look, I know it's kind of a boys' club, but you all really hate me being there, don't you?

ARCHIVIST

What? No, I –

There's a lot of very messed up things going on there and, I… I mean, we were already tied to them, but you I just… You didn't need to get involved.

MELANIE

I really don't think that's true.

…

ARCHIVIST

How's the leg?

MELANIE

Fine. Got shot by a ghost.

ARCHIVIST

Uh… er, what?

MELANIE

Look, can we not do that now? I'm really not in the mood. What do you want?

ARCHIVIST

I… Right. It's… like I said, there's a lot of messed up stuff at the Institute, and… I think the murders might be the least of it. I need someone on the inside to keep an eye on things, let me know what's going on. I'd ask someone else, but…

MELANIE

Tim hates you, and Martin's probably being watched.

ARCHIVIST

And Elias is my chief suspect, so… I'm also rather missing the library. My investigative tools out here are, uh, lacking.

MELANIE

You know what? Fine. Fine! But you tell me everything. Okay? **Everything.**

ARCHIVIST

I mean… you, you won't believe it.

MELANIE

I don't care.

ARCHIVIST

Alright. Alright.

MELANIE

Start with Sasha.

ARCHIVIST

…

Okay.

[CLICK]

MAG087 – The Uncanny Valley

Statement #0141010

[CLICK]

GEORGIE

Look, I'm really not sure about this.

ARCHIVIST

I just need to borrow it for a half hour or so. I, I'll look after it.

GEORGIE

Wha – No, I don't –

You can blow it up for all I care. It's been in the loft for, like, twenty years. If I need tape hiss, I'll add it in post.

ARCHIVIST

So, what's the problem?

GEORGIE

With playing an unmarked tape from your stalker?

ARCHIVIST

Uh…

Look, you just have to trust me, okay.

GEORGIE

Yeah, and I want to do that, but how can I when you still won't tell me what's going on?

ARCHIVIST

You wouldn't believe me!

GEORGIE

Try me.

ARCHIVIST

…

[Sigh] You're right.

It's… It's alright. I can just go.

GEORGIE

Come on, I'm not throwing you out, John. I know you wouldn't be here if you had anywhere else to go, and I… I do want to help, but… y'know, you're a good person. You were, at least. But whatever this is, it's messing you up!

[Sigh] Look I've, I've got work to do. You listen, or don't listen, or

cross-record, or whatever you want, just… just think about it first, okay? You **can** choose to leave it alone.

[DOOR CLOSES]

[SIGH]

[TAPE PLAYER IS LOADED]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

GERTRUDE

Case 0141010, Sebastian Skinner. Incident occurred in Gwydir Forest, North Wales, September 2014. Statement given 10th of October, 2014. Committed to tape 4th of April, 2015. Gertrude Robinson recording.

GERTRUDE (STATEMENT)

Everyone always tells me I don't notice things. "Sebastian," they say, "you wouldn't notice if you grew a second nose." And I suppose in many ways that's true. It's not that I'm forgetful or stupid, you understand, just that I'm not very good at spotting things that are out of place. The mind has a way of filling in things it's not

concentrating on; just wallpapering them over with what you expect to see. I rather think *that* part of my brain is more powerful than in most people. I'll never notice if you got a new haircut or piercing, and it's a bit of a gamble whether I notice when you've had a baby.

You'd think that'd get in the way of being a plumber, but it really hasn't, to be honest. The thing you've got to remember is, if I know what I need to focus on I spot things just fine. And plumbing's great for that – depending on the problem, there's always the things I know need checking, one after the other, until one of them doesn't look right. Then the fix is usually simple enough. There's no need to look at the thing as a whole, or pinpoint changes or oddities.

So, even now, thinking back, it's hard to say if there was anything particularly strange about the call as it came in. Saying that I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary doesn't really mean anything in that context. I suppose that the location they gave me was a bit of a surprise. I run my business out of Penmachno, out in Gwydir Forest, and it's not exactly a densely populated area. I service people all over the region, and I wasn't aware of any village or buildings out in the area of the woods the caller directed me to. I mean, they had co-ordinates on GPS, as there were no street names that they could give for reference. It was an area I did sometimes drive though, and I didn't remember anything being there, but I also didn't really think about it at the time. I suppose I reasoned that maybe there were some houses out there and, well, I hadn't noticed.

The problem sounded like a simple enough blockage, so I packed up

my van, and started the journey over. It shouldn't have taken nearly as long as it did, but the roads aren't all that easy to navigate at night, even with your satnav doing its best, and especially when heading towards somewhere you're not familiar with, trying to find the right road to get into some hidden valley or other. The call must have come in about seven thirty, as I'd just finished my dinner. I don't normally do night callouts, but something about it had seemed urgent, and they had agreed to double my standard rate.

I pulled up to a small collection of ramshackle looking buildings, made of wood and corrugated sheet metal, all set up around a large central building, that seemed like some sort of workshop or small factory. At first I thought it might have been a logging facility, but we were only a few miles from Penmachno, so if there were trees being chopped down here, I'd have known about it. Probably. I mean, even I'd be hard-pressed to miss the sound of industrial chainsaws.

I pulled off the side of what seemed like a makeshift car park and got out. Somebody came over to meet me. Megan, she said her name was, and that we'd spoken on the phone. She was very still when she said this, and seemed to be waiting for me to respond, so I grabbed my tools, and told her to show me to the plughole. She seemed a bit taken aback by this, so I apologised, assuming I'd been a bit too crude for her, and I asked her where I could find the problem drain.

She led me up to the big building, gripped the door, and flung it open wide. There was a damp, metallic smell that came from inside.

Probably from the backed up drain, I thought, although I will admit it didn't smell much like anything I'd encountered before. Megan was stood in the doorway, arms spread wide for some reason, but to be honest I'd been checking my tools, and hadn't really seen what she was doing. I asked her again to take me to the drain, and she made a rather *odd* noise, and led me inside.

We walked through the main floor of the workshop, with people bustling about either side, doing whatever it was they were doing. My mind was focused on the job at hand. Megan took me into a back room full of pipes and gratings, and pointed to a drain in the centre of the floor where dark water was pooling out of the top. You'd have thought the dark red would have clued me in to what was happening but, honestly, there are all sorts of industrial chemicals that turn water that colour, so it didn't really register as worrying. So, I pulled up the grate, and got to work.

All through it, Megan was chatting with me quietly. She was whispering, making it a bit hard to hear her over the noise from the main building, so I mostly just nodded and made the appropriate sounds of interest. And I thought she was talking about her hobbies. After all, I'd never actually heard the term 'flensing' before, and the way she was talking about it I assumed it was some sort of a sculpture. I mean, you meet all sorts of strange people in my line of work, and I pride myself on being able to keep up a gentle conversation with all of them. I have, of course, since looked up flensing, and that certainly throws a lot of that conversation into a very different light indeed. I don't think she was offering to do a

sculpture of me.

Anyway, soon enough I'd found the blockage: a big old wad of hardened fat and oil that had congealed at one of the bends, and removed it for them. It wasn't nearly as big a job as I'd been afraid it might have been, and I talked Megan through my invoicing procedure as we walked back through the workshop floor.

She was silent as I left, and seemed as though she was trying to get over some sort of shock. I guessed that she'd come over a bit queasy when I'd pulled out the blockage, and was embarrassed to admit it. It's a common enough thing: the sight of the sort of mess that builds up in drainpipes can really get to you if you're not used to it. Anyway, I decided not to mention anything, just handed her my details, and told her I'd be in touch about payment. Then I hopped back into my van and drove away. Job done.

At least, I had assumed it was job done. I wish, I very much wish, that it *had* been job done. It was the next day that the phone rang, about midday, and the now-familiar voice of Megan asked me to come back. She said that they were having the same problem, but with a different drain. This struck me as a little bit odd, since I'd been pretty sure a building like that would only have one central drain, which I had already sorted out.

Still, there was no harm in going to have a look, I told myself. After all, they clearly didn't know anything about plumbing over there, and if I took good care of them I might have gotten myself a nice supply of repeat business. So once again I packed up my truck, and

started the drive.

It was the most infuriating thing. Even in the daylight, having been there once already, finding the little valley proved remarkably difficult. I'd set out in good time, but it was still getting well into the afternoon when I finally pulled up into the small, dirt clearing.

I hopped out to a sight that, in the daylight, even I noticed was deeply odd: Megan was stood there, waving a greeting at me, dressed in some sort of bright, blue and red costume, like a jester or a clown. Had she been wearing that the night before? Surely not. Although, I suppose I didn't really look at her clothes. Sat on a folding chair next to her was a squat, thickly muscled woman with close-cropped black hair, who stared at me with a really vicious-looking smirk. She exchanged a glance with Megan, who just nodded at her, and then she burst into cruel laughter, and I was suddenly feeling very uncomfortable.

I just stood there, toolbox in hand, debating whether or not to turn around and drive away. I had just about decided to leave when I felt Megan's hand grip my wrist. I hadn't noticed her moving towards me. Her fingers dug into me, and they felt really, really wrong. Like hard plastic wrapped in raw bacon. She was strong though, strong enough to drag me toward the big workshop and its open door. I was struggling, and told her to let me go, but she just ignored me. I cried out to the woman sat on the lawn chair for help, but she just laughed harder.

I was still begging for help when I felt Megan's hard, cold fingers

dig into the top of my head and turn it to face into the building. I hadn't noticed that we'd reached the door, but in the afternoon sunlight, the reality of what I had walked through the night before was clearly shown in terrible detail.

Rows and rows of old and broken stools stood before crude frames of wire and wood. Sat on each stool were figures of all shapes and sizes. None of them were human. Some were wood themselves, old, and stained with rot. Some were a shiny, dark plastic or porcelain white. A few were cloth and hessian, stuffed to bursting and leaking sawdust from a dozen places. All of them were featureless, and moved with a jerky motion like nothing I had seen outside of my dreams.

Each gripped a razor-sharp knife, and moved it swiftly over the human heads suspended in the frames from wire and fishhooks, gently cutting around the edges. I could see the rest of the bodies piled haphazardly in the corner, and for a second all I was able to do was wonder why they didn't smell worse than they did.

Then all the cutting figures turned to face me at once, and I screamed. And when I screamed, the eyes of every head swivelled in their frames and stared at me with the desperate pleading that told me they still knew pain. I was babbling, pleading with Megan, asking what she wanted. "I want you to meet our boss," she said lightly. I didn't know who that was, and she stared at me, skin starting to slip away from her painted-on eyes. "You may call them I Do Not Know You."

I don't know why those words filled me with such deep dread, but I felt every muscle in my body tighten. On instinct, and without warning, I swung the toolbox up with all the force I had in me into Megan's face, and heard the crunching crack of something brittle shatter. Her hand released my arm as I stared at her, face now twisted and hanging off the dark plastic of her head, the empty mouth moving, trying to match the vile sounds coming from the rest of her.

I ran, sprinting back to my van as fast as I could, only to see that the woman with the cropped hair had stood up and moved to the driver's side door. I didn't have time to slow down; I just prepared to try and tackle her, when she did something I didn't expect. She opened the door for me, and stepped back.

Not taking time to consider this, I leapt into the seat, and started to fumble for the keys. The engine roared to life immediately, and I was just about to get out of there when I realised I could feel the woman's hand on my shoulder. I looked at her, the door still open, and she winked at me. Without warning, a terrible, blistering heat erupted on my back, and I screamed again, this time in agony. Reflex slammed my foot down, and I felt the car start as she removed her hand, laughing that same horrible laugh.

I did manage to get away, though there's a good chance I'll never use this arm properly again. I went to the police, of course. I didn't tell them exactly what happened, just that I'd noticed what I believed to be human remains during a job, and had been attacked as I tried to leave. They actually took me seriously, and were all

prepared to drive out to investigate, as I understand it, when the fire started. The worst fire in Gwydir Forest for almost two hundred years, apparently. Some of the most beautiful natural scenery in the world reduced to ash. It destroyed my home, as well as quite a few of the others in Penmachno, but luckily nobody died.

The weirdest part, though? Nobody died, officially speaking, because although the police, fire crews and forest services combed the burned area acre by scorched acre, they didn't find any human remains at all. The closest they found was the warped and twisted frame of an old, plastic mannequin.

GERTRUDE

Final comments: When this statement was added to the Collection, I was convinced it was the Stranger issuing me a direct threat. Mr. Sebastian Skinner. It seemed too targeted a name to be real. But all my research points to him being a real person: a plumber trading out of Penmachno for almost twenty years. Hopefully not too ominous a coincidence.

The concerning part of this statement, at least as far as I'm concerned, is not so much **what** is happening, as the fact that it is happening so soon. I had assumed Orsinov and her ilk would have spent more time searching for their precious skin, maybe even acting against me directly, before they started alternate preparations. I had hoped I'd have a chance to recover. I can still barely stand.

I'd hoped there would be more time.

As with anything like this, exact calculations are impossible, but based on Mr. Skinner's testimony, I think there's every likelihood that they will be ready to perform the Unknowing within the next few years. There may be no chance for a more… 'nuanced' way to disrupt it, so I'll likely have to resort to a somewhat more… direct countermeasure. Hmm.

It interests me that Jude Perry would be involved. I was unaware that The Lightless Flame had had any contact with the Stranger's ilk, but I suppose it makes sense that it would be a possible ally to the Devastation, especially since their own plans have so recently, erm, gone up in flames. Perhaps they hope to achieve a pride of place in the world Orsinov hopes to bring about? Or maybe, they simply relished the chance to burn down some beautiful forest.

Regardless, I've been keeping an eye Jude's movements ever since she lost Agnes, and it appears she's back in Havering. Part of me wants to confront her, see what she knows, but I'm not that desperate. Not yet. *[Sigh]*

I've been unable to contact Mr. Skinner since he gave his statement. Sad, but unsurprising. There's no doubt in my mind that when the Unknowing begins, one of the dancers will be wearing his face.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Hmm. What strikes me more than anything else here is the date. It's only a year or so before she died. I had assumed Gertrude had recorded to tape for a while and then stopped, but it seems she was recording them right up until the end. But if they did span decades of working at the Institute, why aren't there more? And what decided which statements she transferred?

Regardless, whoever my mystery pen pal is, it seems they're pushing me in a very deliberate direction. It sounds like the Unknowing is a ritual, one connected to the Stranger, this 'I Do Not Know You'. What did Gertrude mean about skin? The page she was given by Mary, maybe? No, that doesn't add up. *[Sigh]* God, this is confusing.

For the first time, though, I feel like I might have a lead. It's tangential, not directly connected to the Stranger or the Unknowing, but… but I have a name now. Jude Perry, and she was still living in London less than two years ago. It's not much, but it is a start. I don't know if I have the resources to track her down myself, but if Melanie's willing to help, the Institute might have more luck.

[FAINT SOUNDS OF CALLIOPE MUSIC COME DRIFTING IN]

ARCHIVIST

If she is an active member of the Lightless Flame cult there's every possibility tracking her down will be dangerous, but it's also the… the only…?

[STARTS BREATHING HEAVILY]

[Sotto voce, shakily] Oh god…

[DOOR OPENS]

GEORGIE

Can you hear that? Like a, an ice cream van or something?

ARCHIVIST

Circus!

GEORGIE

Yeah. Yeah, thought I was going mad. Christ, are you alright?

[THE MUSIC FADES AWAY]

ARCHIVIST

Ummm…

GEORGIE

Was it the tape?

ARCHIVIST

What? No! No, it w– it w– it was – it was outside.

GEORGIE

No, not, not the music, your face!

ARCHIVIST

What?

GEORGIE

That's it. Whatever the hell this deal is, the tapes, documents, I don't want them in my house.

ARCHIVIST

Look, look… No, no…

Look, you, you don't need to be scared.

GEORGIE

I'm not! **You** are! Look at you, you can barely stand!

ARCHIVIST

But I… But I need –

GEORGIE

Listen to me, John. I can't stop you doing… whatever secret bullshit

you want to do, and I'm… not going to throw you out on the street, but I'm not having it in by home.

ARCHIVIST

No… No, they won't. I'll make sure it doesn't… I'll keep it far away.

GEORGIE

No, you need to stop.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not sure I can.

[CLICK]

MAG088 – Dig

Statement #0030411

[CLICK]

BASIRA

Huh.

You still recording then?

MARTIN

What?

[CHAIRS MOVING, PAPERS RUSTLING]

BASIRA

Why? I thought that was John's thing.

MARTIN

I mean, yeah, a bit.

You wanted to see me?

BASIRA

Yeah, well, your boss is busy and I tried talking to Tim, but…

MARTIN

Yeah, right.

BASIRA

And he said Sasha's gone, so I thought I'd talk to you.

MARTIN

Okay. What do you want?

BASIRA

I'm looking for Daisy.

MARTIN

Oh for – Okay, I don't know where she is! I don't know where anybody is! Why does everyone… okay, why does **everyone** think that I **always** know where everyone is, all the time?!

BASIRA

Alright, okay, alright, sorry. They just… well, they said at the station that *this* was the last place she checked in.

MARTIN

When she was interviewing us. That was like a month ago!

BASIRA

Yeah, I haven't heard anything so I went to check in with her at the

station, and they said she hadn't been in since February.

MARTIN

And no-one's looked into that?

BASIRA

I mean, they don't keep a close eye on… Well, she goes off the grid sometimes when working a case. Never this long, though. I thought it might have something to do with… y'know.

MARTIN

Look, he didn't kill anyone, okay? There's… I think something's going on, okay. I actually think he was framed.

BASIRA

Yeah, well, I hope so. If not, well… I just can't believe I was so stupid, you know? He really got me.

MARTIN

Got you how?

BASIRA

I actually thought I misjudged him. Hell, I liked the guy.

MARTIN

Wait, you mean… like you…

BASIRA

[Spluttering] Oh, what? Urgh, no! Why does everyone think that?

MARTIN

Right, yeah, ‘cause I don’t actually… I don’t actually think he…

BASIRA

I just, I mean he was good company. Y’know, when he wasn’t being a paranoia machine. He was funny, you know?

MARTIN

What, John?

BASIRA

Yeah.

MARTIN

I don’t think I’ve ever heard him tell a joke.

BASIRA

Maybe you weren’t listening.

MARTIN

Right. Well, I’m sure it’ll get sorted out when *Daisy* brings him in and you can probably talk to him then. Oh, sorry, I forgot you’re not actually *with* the police any more, are you.

BASIRA

Thanks.

So, you have no idea where Daisy is?

MARTIN

I'm sure she's fine. She's probably just using her "operation discretion" to bully someone else.

BASIRA

What did you say?

MARTIN

Well, she was really rude, actually. She threatened to say I –

BASIRA

No, no. Did she use the phrase "operational discretion"?

MARTIN

Yeah. She said she had "full operational discretion".

Is everything alright?

BASIRA

I need to find him.

MARTIN

Well, I'm sure your partner will find him; I just hope she's not as –

BASIRA

No, I need to find him now! You're sure you don't know where she is?

MARTIN

No! I don't know anything.

BASIRA

Okay, alright, fine. Just… Here's my number. You call me *immediately* if you find anything out, okay?

MARTIN

Fine. Now please, we're *really* busy.

BASIRA

Yeah, I need to go.

MARTIN

Yeah, good luck.

[DOOR OPENS, CLOSES]

MARTIN

Right, um, let's…

…

[PAPERS SHUFFLING]

Martin Blackwood, Archival Assistant at the Magnus Institute, recording statement number 0031104, statement of Enrique MacMillan, given 4th November 2003.

Statement begins.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

I never really loved the digging. Too much like hard work, I always used to say, and I'm not a young man anymore. So generally, if the finds aren't near enough the surface for me to just pick them up, I'll leave them be. Sometimes, though, you just can't help yourself. You need to **know** what's under there, so you get down on your knees and dig, dig, dig.

Last Saturday was like that. I hadn't thought it would be, really. My knees had been acting up all week because of the damp, and I was mainly going out for the walk, rather than looking for any particular finds. To be honest, I was in two minds about taking the metal detector at all; it's not exactly a lightweight piece of equipment. Back when I lived in London I always used to do mudlarking down the Thames. Wandering through the low tide with nothing but a bag, my eyes and a pair of thick gloves. I miss those days, without the weight of the detector. Without the **need** to dig.

I don't even know why I took it. In the end, that stretch of beach is hardly virgin territory for hobbyists like me, and it's usually been picked perfectly clean. So you can imagine my surprise when I started to pick something up just before Smeatons Pier.

It was almost dark by this point, and the cool salt air of St Ives harbour blew a fine spray of sand against my cheeks. It stung slightly, but not in an unpleasant way. Bracing, I think the word is. It was peaceful, quiet, and I was lost in my own thoughts, staring out over the darkening ocean, when the metal detector interrupted, breaking my trance.

I pulled out my little torch and shone it at the spot, looking for the telltale glint. But there was nothing but sand. Whatever it was must have been buried. I was debating with myself whether to leave it be when the detector barked again, more insistently. I hadn't found anything else that day, so I sighed, pulled out my small, metal spade out of my bag, and started to dig.

It was only a minute or two before I saw it, a hint of gold-plated metal amid the coarser gold of the sand. A watch. The face was cracked down the middle, and the hands were frozen at four nineteen, but other than that it seemed to be in rather good condition. Not a bad little find, I remember thinking, as I started to clean the sand from around it. And uncovered the wrist it was still attached to.

I think I screamed. I must have cried out in some way, but nobody heard me, as there was no-one to hear **but** me. I cleared away a bit

more sand, just to be sure of what I was seeing, and quickly revealed a stiff, unmoving hand. The flesh was icy cold and discoloured, so I was certain its owner must be dead, but it didn't appear to have begun decomposing. I lowered myself slowly to the ground, trying to collect my thoughts, considering the thing I had just discovered with my clumsy, reckless digging.

I wanted to call the police immediately, but I don't *have* a mobile phone, and it was a little bit of a walk to the nearest phonebox. My legs wouldn't stop shaking when I tried to stand up, so I sat there for a while, my torch shining on that lifeless hand, trying to compose myself enough to go get help. It was an odd thing, that hand. The fingers were bent and bloody, and the nails had been chipped and broken. From the looks of it, the damage had happened before its owner had passed away.

Then I noticed something else in the sand next to it. Something protruding ever so slightly from the sand I'd already disturbed. It didn't seem like part of the body, and I found myself reaching over to try and pull it up. It slipped out of the sand easily, eagerly even, and I didn't even need to dig.

It was a book. The cloth of the cover had worn away, and it was still wet from the seawater that covered the area at high tide. I expected it to be a useless lump of wet paper mush, fused together and unreadable, but when I pulled it open the pages came apart easily. There was a label at the very front, but the ink had run and I have no idea what it might have said. So I turned to the first page.

It was very strange. It was just the one word, solid capital letters in a small, neat typeface at the very centre of the page. It said ‘DIG’. I took that to be the title, and turned to the next page. ‘DIG’. Exactly the same. The third page. ‘DIG’. The fourth page. ‘DIG’. Dig, dig, dig, dig.

Holding it hurt my hands. You know the way that if you say or read a word over and over again, it starts to lose all its meaning? To just sound like a jumble of noises or unrelated letters? Well this was the opposite. Every time I read it, it was like the meaning of the word became more solid in my mind. I knew what it was to find your meaning buried in the earth, to claw your sense from under the sand and mud and soil, to dig.

I had almost completely unearthed the body when the police arrived. Apparently a late-night jogger had spotted the scene, and called them. They believed me when I explained to them how I had found it, though they were none too pleased that I had so thoroughly ruined what may well have been a crime scene. I don’t think it was, and one of the friendlier officers later told me the man had probably dug himself too deep a hole in the beach, and it had collapsed on him when the tide had come in. A tragedy, but not unheard of. They still weren’t pleased with me, though, and once they had my statement I was sent on my way. The book was in my bag, and they didn’t ask to look inside, so… I kept it. I probably should have mentioned it to the police, but they were very rude. I understand now, of course, that they were simply irritated that I had robbed them of **their** opportunity to dig.

Perhaps they sensed it, that *need* inside of us. Above us, you see, there's only the sky, the infinite, a void of space and emptiness so incredible that to think of it in detail is to overwhelm the mind. But down, down into the earth. Through the many layers of this globe, this sphere built and crusted upon a single, beating point. The centre of the universe for each and every one of us, that glorious convergence from which everything, everywhere, is 'up'. To reach it, to approach that source, that rolling, molten centre of it all, the only thing you have to do is dig.

I've dreamed of it, of course. Safe and happy below, wrapped on all sides by uncounted miles of crushing, loving, earth and stone. I see it, and watch the passing of history build upon it, layer after layer. To travel down into the ground is to travel through time, that's what I always used to say, before I found my book. And I still believe it, but time is the least of the things that waits for us down there, things I can barely think of without collapsing in fear. A thousand terrible things, trapped and alone, out of air and out of light, all contained within those three hideous letters: DIG.

In those dreams I hold a spade. It screams when I plunge it into the weeping soil, and the voice it cries out with is my own. The soft mud begs me to stop, trying in vain to save me. But I do not listen, and the pitted ruin of my shovel moves lump after lump of it, tearing it free of itself, and piling it around me, sculpting my own grave. Bringing the ground up to meet me where I must be buried. It fills my lungs, and I am free. I am awake. The shovel is in my hand, and the book is open to its chapter and verse: DIG.

In the moments without the shovel, without the torn ground, I have tried to find out more about the book, maybe even get rid of it. A bookseller I asked about it pointed me towards you and yours, before I dug into him, and so here I came. To tell my story, of course, but another thing as well; cold, empty and calling. There's something here, you see. Something to be dug up, rooted out, buried within. A hollow space that all eyes point towards. And I intend to reach it, if my fingers don't give out first. I know where to **dig.**

MARTIN

[Recomposing himself] Uh, um, the, uh, the statement ends rather abruptly there. Based on a few scattered notes and accounts from some of the older staff, it sounds like Mr. Macmillan got in a bit of a fight, which led to his arrest, and the replacement of quite a bit of the floor in John's office. There are still a couple of boards with marks on them that I'd always hoped weren't fingernail scratches, but I guess…

…

Anyway, Mr. Macmillan passed away while awaiting trial. Official cause of death is listed as "asphyxiation", but I can't find any details about exactly what happened. The book is currently held by Artefact Storage in a welded iron box, and placed on the top of the Do Not Access list, but since then it doesn't look like it's caused anything weird to happen.

[KNOCKING ON DOOR]

Er, yes?

[DOOR OPENS]

MELANIE

Hi, have you got a moment?

MARTIN

Um, yeah, I think, um…

MELANIE

Are you alright?

MARTIN

Yeah… Sorry, just a lot of change recently, y'know. You and John and Sasha and… everything's gone a bit wrong.

It's the not knowing, you know? I mean, John's still alive. Not sure why, but I'm sure of that. But Sasha, I…

MELANIE

Yes, it's… it's probably, um…

MARTIN

Sorry, sorry, I'm – What do you need?

MELANIE

Oh, right, yes. Is there any sort of database, maybe?

[MARTIN SNORTS]

MELANIE

Statement givers or people referenced? I'm trying to get hold of a witness from a recent one.

MARTIN

Yeah, yeah, I wish. That would… I mean, that would make the job a *lot* easier.

MELANIE

No-one's even tried to make one?

MARTIN

Oh, you weren't here when we took the place over from Gertrude. It's been over a year just to get it like this. I mean, I think the database was on John's list, but…

MELANIE

So how do you track someone down?

MARTIN

Oh, oh well, y'know, we've a few contacts in various record offices around the place. Aside from that it's just… just a bit of detective work, really. Er, Tim used to do a great line in impersonating people to utility companies. Ah, the number of times he got them to give him 'his own' address…

MELANIE

Right, right… Um, this one, the name is "Jude Perry". Doesn't mean anything to you, does it?

MARTIN

Uh… no. Did she give a statement?

MELANIE

Not yet.

MARTIN

Well. Sorry I can't be more help.

MELANIE

Sure. Oh, er, one other thing. Who do I talk to about Artefact Storage?

MARTIN

Oh, er, depends what you need, probably Sonja. Why? Are you sure you're ready for it?

MELANIE

What's that supposed to mean?

MARTIN

No, no, I just, just… Y'know, it's… There's a lot of weird stuff in there.

MELANIE

[Indignant] I'm not an amateur, Martin. I know the sort of thing that's in there. I just need to know who I talk to about missing pieces.

MARTIN

Yeah, prob-probably Sonja.

Wait, why? What's gone missing?

MELANIE

An old calliope *[pronounces it 'Ka-lee-o-pee']* organ. It's there in the inventory, but no-one can find it when I ask.

MARTIN

Huh. I mean, that's not… great. Er, did you need it for something?

MELANIE

Just following up a statement. Trying to get a few answers, you

know?

MARTIN

Huh. Well, if you find any, let me know.

[CLICK]

MAG089 – Twice as Bright

Statement #0172404

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Something funny, Ms. Perry?

JUDE

[Chuckling] Uh, yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Care to share?

JUDE

I think it's pretty obvious.

ARCHIVIST

Look, I lost my normal coat, and i-it's cold. Some of us actually *feel* it, you know?

JUDE

You wouldn't shake my hand.

ARCHIVIST

Well, no, I'm not stupid! Whatever the Lightless Flame is –

L-Look, will you stop that?!

JUDE

[Laughing] Oh, alright. Ah… I hate explaining jokes, but, um… Imagine you're, um… a butcher, and one day an injured little lamb walks into your workshop, and strides right into one of the mincing machines, but when you go up to it, knife in hand, it shakes it's head and tells you "I'm not stupid". Do you get why that's funny?

ARCHIVIST

Right. But no more abattoir metaphors, please.

JUDE

Suppose it's not really *me,* is it? Would you rather be a really stupid piece of firewood?

ARCHIVIST

I just have a few questions. Did you burn down a section of Gwydir Forest last year?

JUDE

Not alone, but yes. You should have seen how devastated they were, such a loss.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sure the Forestry Commission were mortified. Why?

JUDE

…

Stop that! And it was because Nikola Orsinov asked us to. She was done with the place, and we're always happy to help, when that help is destroying something someone loves.

ARCHIVIST

But –

JUDE

No more questions, Archivist!

ARCHIVIST

I just… er, you were a friend of Agnes Montague, correct?

JUDE

She's **not** one of your little stories.

ARCHIVIST

According to the statement of Jack Barnabas, she very much is.

JUDE

The burnt-face little runt? He got what was coming to him. Just like…

ARCHIVIST

Yes, yes, I understand, you could easily kill me, I'm at your mercy, blah, blah, blah. I have heard it before. And from things **much** scarier than you.

JUDE

That a fact?

ARCHIVIST

Okay, so… why haven't you done it?

JUDE

We're in public.

ARCHIVIST

Well, you're not – You're hardly keeping your voice down.

JUDE

You talk about god and death and demons nice and loud, and watch people bend over backwards not to listen to what you're saying. No-one cares.

ARCHIVIST

If you say so.

JUDE

Are you trying to talk me *into* killing you? If I wanted, I could reach through your chest like runny wax, and hold your heart while it cooked. No-one would even notice, if I didn't give you time to scream.

ARCHIVIST

Right. R-right. So why don't you? Does your 'god' not want you to?

JUDE

[Considering] Hard to say. When I look at you I feel that burning liquid pain, eager to flow out and purify your rotten carcass, but I feel that a lot.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. M-More or less than normal?

JUDE

Hard to say when *every* nerve ending's on fire. Hard to tell degrees.

ARCHIVIST

[Softly] Third degree, maybe?

Oh! Sorry, sorry, it was a…

I have a god too, right?

JUDE

Is that another joke?

ARCHIVIST

N-No, I… I'm new to this. Everyone keeps calling me 'Archivist", like I'm special, and that… that I serve the Eye. Trying to kill me for it.

JUDE

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

S-So… I-It's like… *your* 'god', right?

JUDE

Oh please, your god is nothing! The Eye, Beholding, Ceaseless Watcher, whatever you call it, that's all it does, it watches and knows, sitting bulbous and comfortable in the ignorance of infinite knowledge.

I serve a reckoning, a surging tide of destruction and pain.

ARCHIVIST

The Lightless Flame.

JUDE

The Desolation. Blackened Earth. The destructive, agonising heat of burning flesh and land scoured of life. The light, the comfort of fire stripped from it, leaving nothing but the terror of its approach. **When** it triumphs, it will leave The Eye a burned and shrivelled husk that sees nothing but its own agony.

ARCHIVIST

I, er, I think I… I-I see. So if one… if one wants to watch everything, to know everything and the other wants to… destroy –

JUDE

[Exhales laughingly] You don't even know what this is about, do you?

ARCHIVIST

So tell me!

JUDE

An Archivist pleading for knowledge. *That,* oh, that is satisfying to see.

ARCHIVIST

Look, if you're just… You're just about my only lead, and if you're… Just kill me, alright? If it's so easy? If you're not going to tell me anything worth my time.

JUDE

Now you're sounding like an Archivist.

ARCHIVIST

Hm.

JUDE

And now I'm obviously not going to kill you.

ARCHIVIST

Why not?

JUDE

Consider it a favour.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

JUDE

Not for **you**. For Elias.

ARCHIVIST

Wait, but… *[Splutters]* I mean, if I serve Beholding or… He-He's in a lot deeper than I am. I think.

JUDE

The rumour is **he** killed Gertrude Robinson. If so, I feel like I owe him. And he clearly wants you alive, so…

ARCHIVIST

What, no? But she was the last Archivist, so, y-your… your god… Why?

JUDE

The unfathomable contest of eternal forces is not the only reason I might want someone dead.

ARCHIVIST

So… so tell me the story of why you wanted Gertrude – AH – AAH!

[SOUND OF SIZZLING]

JUDE

Try to compel me again, and I'll **burn** it out your mouth.

…

[BIRDS CHIRP HAPPILY]

Now you're scared. Now you're getting it. There's no safety in sitting on the sidelines watching. The audience is only *safe* when the story isn't about them.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Fine! Keep your damn secrets.

JUDE

…

No. Maybe I do want to tell you a story.

ARCHIVIST

Well, if it's not about Gertrude or Gwydir…. And I can't talk about A– right… Then what?

JUDE

I'm going to give you some advice.

ARCHIVIST

Fantastic.

Well?

JUDE

Aren't you going to say your words?

ARCHIVIST

[Sigh] Statement of Jude Perry, regarding… some advice. Recorded direct from subject, April 24th, 2017. Statement begins.

JUDE (STATEMENT)

Well, if you smother a flame, it dies. The only way it grows and flourishes is if you feed it. It's about making sure you find enough fuel for it, and… not caring where it comes from. If you spend your time hiding and fretting about who you hurt, you'll sputter, and you'll die as surely as any candle. Don't be afraid to burn.

The pain is sensational. You feel your flesh cooking, your nerves screaming out as they die exquisitely. Your whole body changes texture as you become that which feeds the fire. In that agonising, beautiful transformation, you can feel it ignite again and again and again.

At least, that's how it feels for me. I don't know how it would feel for you. Maybe you get an itchy eye? I don't care. The point is, whatever form it takes, you have to feed it for it to grow strong. Otherwise you're the one that gets consumed.

I never hid my flame. Not once. Even before I found my god, I burned as bright as I liked, and those who ventured too close simply ended up fuelling my brilliance. At the time, the closest thing I had to god was cocaine, though I also spent my evenings as an acolyte to alcohol.

But my true thrill was money. Not mine, of course, though I had plenty, but the money of others I could fling upon the pyre of the stock market. Whether it ignited into something more or simply burned down to ash meant nothing to me, it was the thrill that I

craved.

This is decades ago now; I was one of the top bankers for… eh, it doesn't matter, they're not important. Not to mention that a series of severe fires has long since put them out of business. The point was, that I burned through too much of myself, because I didn't know what else I *could* burn. My girlfriend saw it, though she had no idea how to help with the deep depression that had settled over me.

I never slept much to begin with, but… now even the choice seemed denied to me. I was sluggish and listless at work, and people began to notice. My rating began to drop. My colleagues would whisper, and not-so-subtly leave me off invitations for what little socialising there was. I was burned out in every sense but one. And that was the one that saved me.

It was Agnes, of course. I don't know where she found me, I only remember sitting in a booth with a beautiful young woman who smelled like matches and incense. I was drinking coffee so hot it peeled the skin from the roof of my mouth, but I didn't care, because looking at her filled me with every kind of heat. We were talking about sacrifice, about power, about… things that even now I struggle to fully understand.

She was soft-spoken and shy, and… I gradually became aware of other people stood around us. There seemed nothing remarkable about them at first: different clothes, different ages, just a dozen or so unremarkable strangers. There was something in their faces,

though, a vicious hunger that I knew mirrored my own. And they all looked at Agnes with such devotion.

One of them, a round-faced black woman I'd later know as Sandy, squatted down next to me, and stared into my face. She made a noise of dismissal, and leaned in close to stare at me. She said, "I don't think so," and her breath hit me like a furnace. I instinctively thrust out a hand to push her away. But as I touched her face, she remained still, and instead my hand sank into it like softened candle wax.

I screamed, but if anyone heard me, they didn't do anything. I could only stare as thick rivulets of molten flesh flowed down my arm and onto the ground, and Sandy's body shook as though with laughter, even as my hand stayed encased in her warped and yielding head. I probably don't need to describe how much it hurt. It would be a long time before I was able to use the hand again.

At last, I calmed down enough to pull my scalded, wax-encrusted hand from her head. She stood up, pressed her fingers to her face and calmly squeezed it back into shape. It didn't look exactly the same as before, though there was no mistaking the voice that came from her lips. She turned to Agnes, and nodded her approval. Agnes, for her part, had been talking this entire time, I realised, and *somehow* I had been listening. I knew what to do.

Nicholas Tregenza was the one that I chose. I had other colleagues I hated far more, of course, and in many ways I might have even called Nick a friend, but… unlike so many of the others, he had a

lot to live for. His wife Julie had just given birth to a squalling brat that he'd named Desmond – awful name for a baby – and he'd saved enough money to move away from London entirely. He'd just bought a house. When he spoke to me, he had *hope* in his face, and so much life in him, it still makes me smile to think about it.

I invited him out for a drink to celebrate his good fortune, got him drunk, and stabbed him to death in a filthy alleyway near the edge of the Docklands. He didn't even have the wherewithal to look surprised. His skin didn't yield as easily as Sandy's had, but I suppose that's what knives are for, isn't it?

And just like that, he was dead. And I felt **no** different. I had a minute of blind panic – how could I have been such an idiot? I hadn't even planned ahead enough to consider how I might dump the body. I had just been so desperate to stoke the fire I still felt sputtering inside me.

Then all at once, I saw the faintest tongues of smoke creeping around his body. In an instant it was *burning,* and I was surrounded by that smell of matches and incense… mixed with an oily smell like cooking pork. And as he burned, I felt my senses sharpen. My limbs were alive with searing energy, and my heart was aglow with love; the agonising, terrifying love of something that I knew must be a god. **My** god. The lightless inferno of desolation, of pain and destruction. My tears of joy were nothing but steam.

Nick's body didn't completely burn to ash. Of course not, there needed to be something to identify. After all, what does my god

care about death? It was the destruction of his life that it hungered for, the agony and fear of his wife and child, those that loved him, so they had to *know* that he was dead. Killed and mutilated in a pointless and unforeseeable act of unutterable violence.

Then it was simply a matter of forging his signature on a few documents implicating him in some very illegal transactions to get his assets stripped from him. Oh, and burning down the new house, of course. And with each act of glorious, hateful destruction, I felt my god's love embrace me, consume me, give me life. Any feelings of pity or mercy I might have had for the poor woman I fed from were cauterised.

Julie's dead now, of course, though I do keep half an eye on their son Desmond: see if he has anything worth taking from him.

At first I channelled this new energy into my job and my relationship. Gretchen and I had never been happier as I moved from one success to the next. I think she realised there was something else going on, though. Perhaps she suspected how much my mind drifted to Agnes when I held her in my arms. I know she wondered about how I started keeping petrol in the cupboard, and about my newfound love of scented candles.

But she never asked. Never ever mentioned it. Perhaps on some level, she knew as well as I did where we were headed, but there are some things you just have to accept that in the end they'll cause you pain.

I should have been caught, really. For all that it gifted to me, my faith did little to hide my crimes beyond ensuring they were scoured of physical evidence. And I know the police were investigating a possible serial murderer targeting people in my industry. But for whatever reason, they never gave me a second look. I later learned my new brothers and sisters of the Lightless Flame had taken it upon themselves to help hide my crimes, but even they are only human. Some of them, at least.

I know now they were simply guiding me upon the path to my true epiphany. All this time I was serving my god, but only for my *own* glory. But with each new gift, each renewal of the fire, I saw how lifeless and hollow it was, how grey and ashen my existence had become. It became clear that, where once I had destroyed to fuel *my* life, I now lived for the pain that I caused. And for Agnes. My sweet, hopeless Agnes.

And so I ended it. For all the agony and pain on Gretchen's face, she didn't seem surprised when I doused myself in kerosene and set it alight. I think she screamed. She must have screamed. But I couldn't hear it. As the heat warped my bones and bubbled my flesh, all I heard was the loving exaltation of my god.

JUDE

Huh. I suppose you did compel me after all.

ARCHIVIST

B-But what about, um –

JUDE

Uh-uh-uh. Try again and I will *actually* kill you. I don't care what favours your boss might have done for me, I will tell my story to your smouldering corpse.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. I just wanted to know when it happened, is all.

JUDE

I met Agnes in 1989, and completed my transformation in 1991.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. I-It's just that you don't… I mean you don't seem like you're, what, in your fifties? Or – Or burnt to a crisp.

JUDE

Wax is remarkably easy to mould.

[SOUNDS OF DEMONSTRATIVE SQUELCHING]

[NOISES OF A HORRIFIED ARCHIVIST]

JUDE

[Laughs] Oh come on! You're going to need a much stronger stomach than that if you're going to walk this path.

ARCHIVIST

I-I-I mean… I don't…

JUDE

It's like you're not even listening. You have your god, as I have mine. Feed it, fearlessly and without hesitation, or it will feed on you.

ARCHIVIST

But I don't… I don't… I mean, I mean, what do I feed it?

JUDE

I don't know? You're the one it picked. Not a great choice, if you ask me.

ARCHIVIST

I didn't ask you. Look, is there anything else you can tell me?

JUDE

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

Anything you're *willing* to tell me?

JUDE

No.

ARCHIVIST

I don't suppose I could talk to anyone else in your, um…

JUDE

It's fine, you can call it a cult. And no, they wouldn't hesitate. They're not as friendly as I am.

ARCHIVIST

Well, thank you for the… advice. And the dead end.

JUDE

Wait.

ARCHIVIST

Hmm?

JUDE

If you're really keen to keep chatting to things that could kill you, I might know someone. We're not on great terms, he's closer to your lot than mine, but I know where he… exists.

ARCHIVIST

Who… What is he?

JUDE

Calls himself Mike.

ARCHIVIST

Michael?

JUDE

I guess Mike is normally short for Michael, yeah?

ARCHIVIST

Corridors, weird limbs, laughs like a… headache?

JUDE

What? No. He's pale, got a big, weird scar. Smells of, um…

ARCHIVIST

Oh, ozone!

JUDE

Yeah, that's the one. Hangs around with the Fairchilds sometimes.

ARCHIVIST

Michael Crew.

JUDE

That's him. I know where you can find him.

ARCHIVIST

Where?

JUDE

Not for free.

ARCHIVIST

Okay. What do you want?

JUDE

Oh, nothing much. Just shake my hand.

ARCHIVIST

W-What?

JUDE

You hurt my feelings earlier. I want you to shake my hand.

…

Come on. It won't hurt.

ARCHIVIST

Fine.

[SIZZLING, INTENSIFIES]

JUDE

I lied.

[ARCHIVIST SCREAMS]

[CLICK]

MAG090 – Body Builder

Statement #0130807

[CLICK]

ELIAS

Tim?

TIM

Hey, boss. What brings you down to the dungeons? Your office just too full of joy?

ELIAS

Not quite. I heard you'd had some absences. Some unauthorised leave. I just wanted to talk it through with you.

TIM

Right.

ELIAS

Were you sick? If you're sick you really need to call in.

TIM

Nope. Wasn't sick. Try again.

ELIAS

Well, you hadn't booked any leave.

TIM

No, I had not.

ELIAS

So, what happened?

TIM

I hopped a flight to Malaysia. Found myself a hotel.

ELIAS

I see. You were trying to leave us?

TIM

Yeah.

ELIAS

But you've returned?

TIM

I… I got sick. The longer I was gone… I felt weak, like, like I was losing myself. You gonna fire me boss?

ELIAS

No. I don't think that'll be necessary.

TIM

Of course not.

ELIAS

But let's be sure it doesn't happen again, hm?

TIM

…

You do *know,* right? I mean, you must know.

ELIAS

Know what?

TIM

About this place. About what it does to us.

ELIAS

[Sigh] Tim, this place is very old. It has all sorts of… idiosyncrasies and not all of them are good for the people who work here.

TIM

I think I'd prefer asbestos.

ELIAS

I've always found the best way to deal with it is to lose yourself in work. Personally, the comfortable rigour of bureaucracy has always helped me. Perhaps doing a bit of mindless filing will help distract you.

TIM

Yeah. I mean… maybe you're right.

ELIAS

I'm sure I am. And no more unauthorised absence, okay?

[DOOR OPENS]

MARTIN

Oh, er, is everything okay in here?

ELIAS

Yes, Martin, very much so.

[DEPARTING FOOTSTEPS]

MARTIN

Right. Um, I was actually gonna to record a statement, if, if that's alright Tim?

TIM

Yeah. It's already running.

MARTIN

Oh. Oh, so it is. Why, why did you tur-

[DOOR CLOSES]

Right. Right.

Martin Blackwood, Archival Assistant at the Magnus Institute, recording statement number 0130807, statement of Ross Davenport, given August 7th 2013.

Statement begins.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

So I had to find a new gym. It was a shame, really. I loved my old place, and the guys there were some of my best mates, but… it wasn't entirely my own decision. See, I recently decided to start taking anabolic steroids to supplement my bodybuilding, and the place I *used* to go had a very strict policy about them. Matt, the guy who ran the place, his partner had gotten deep into them, and when he had a heart attack, Matt blamed the steroids. Since then, you get seen with a needle or pill bottle that's not a recognised supplement, and you're outta there.

Still, I didn't leave because I got caught or anything like that. I hadn't even started when I left. I just felt guilty. Like it was an

admission of failure. Eleven years I'd been going, all natural, and, physically, I was at the top of my game. I did well in competitions, I felt healthy, I was pretty much the ideal weight for my height, but when I looked in the mirror I still didn't see what I wanted to. My muscles were smooth and rounded, not like the, the veined, bulging forms I idolised. Even when I spent weeks dieting before a competition, without an ounce of body fat, I, I just couldn't get there. I'd reached my natural peak, and it wasn't enough for me.

So, I did my research, and ordered a cycle of steroids online. I didn't want to be unsafe, so I made sure I got a full check-up from my doctor before I started, though obviously I didn't mention why. Everything came back fine, so all that was left was to find a new gym where nobody would mind me taking them.

This was harder than it should have been, mostly because of my own standards. Plenty of places had an 'official' policy banning drugs onsite and just didn't enforce it. To me, though, the whole point of moving gyms was that I didn't want to have to hide like a criminal, or pretend to think what I was doing was wrong. I wanted somewhere I could be honest about who I was and what I wanted to be.

Eventually I found it, weirdly enough, in the Yellow Pages. Online searches hadn't shown anywhere promising near my home on the outskirts of Aberdeen, so I thought I might as well try the phone book. As you'd expect, most of the listings just pointed me towards the their websites, but I spotted a small, square ad box in the lower left corner. It was text only, and read, "Your perfect body is here.

Become all you can be." Followed by a landline number and an address about five minutes walk from me. So I gave them a call.

The voice that answered was rough and spoke in the sort of English accent that usually gets my hackles up, but when I asked him what the gym's policy on steroids was, he just laughed, and said that if it helped me "perfect myself" then it was more than welcome. I arranged to swing by the following day and check the place out.

From the outside the gym wasn't much to look at. Just the faded outline of a dumbbell on a grimy window, and the words "Weights and Cardio" just about readable over the door. I realised that I actually passed this place pretty regularly, I'd just always assumed it was out of business.

The door was open, though, so I went inside. It was a hot day, but the air in the reception was cool, tinged with that familiar scent of sweat, and something else I couldn't quite identify. There wasn't anyone behind the desk, and the computer didn't look like it had been turned on all day. I was about to call out, see if I could get somebody's attention, when I heard the door to the changing rooms open, and someone stepped out.

The man who stood there was, without a doubt, the biggest guy I had ever seen, and bear in mind I spend my time hanging out with bodybuilders. He had to hunch down to fit through the doorway, and was almost twice as wide as I was. Most of his body was covered in a loose tracksuit, and I could see clear stitch marks where it had been enlarged for him. Embroidered onto the chest

was the letter ‘J’.

Despite his enormous size, his face seemed pretty normal, even handsome, with the sort of cheekbones and jawline I’d kill for. He smiled when I stammered out a hello, and asked if I was Ross from the phone. Sure, I said, and he immediately launched into all sorts of questions about my workout, what I was looking for, what safety measures I had for my steroids, that sort of thing. None of it was unexpected, and he clearly knew his stuff.

But then he started asking me some slightly more personal questions: why I’d become a bodybuilder, how it made me feel, what parts of myself I hated. It felt a bit… invasive, but I answered honestly, and he seemed satisfied, turning around and gesturing for me to follow as he headed in to show me around.

The gym itself was good, but nothing special. It actually didn’t have much in the way of cardio machines, but that had never really been my priority, so it wasn’t a problem. There was also quite a lot of old-fashioned gymnastics equipment: parallel beams, vaulting horses, high bars, all that sort of thing. It was a huge room, and to be honest, part of me just assumed that they were there to use up some of the space. It certainly had everything I needed, although I did wonder why we were the only ones in there.

It was the changing room that really struck me as odd, though. There was just the one: apparently unisex, though I doubted any women were members. It was decent size, and had plenty of showers, good water pressure, everything you needed. It all seemed

perfectly normal, except for one thing.

The lockers were absolutely *enormous.* They came right up to the ceiling, which was easily twelve foot from the floor, and must have been a good two or three feet wide. Each had what looked to be a unique lock, and only a few of them had keys in.

My guide explained that every member of the gym had their own locker, and kept it as long as they were a member. I asked what happened when all the lockers were taken and he just shrugged. “No new members,” he said. When he shrugged, the fabric of his hoodie moved in such an odd way. It was fascinating, and I made a mental note to keep an eye out for him in the gym, so I could get a proper look at him.

I walked over to one of the lockers with the key still in it, number 31, and pulled it out. I looked back at him, and he nodded. The locker was just as big inside as I’d thought, and went back about five feet into the wall. Forget a workout bag, I could have stored my entire wardrobe in that thing.

After that, I headed back into the reception, and the guy took down my details, I signed a few forms and, just like that, I was a member. He told me to keep the key, and explained that he preferred to have membership fees paid in cash. That didn’t surprise me. I got the feeling that there were a few things about the place that wouldn’t pass any sort of official audit.

Still, it suited me perfectly, so I had no interest in causing them any

sort of trouble. I gave him a big thumbs up, and he nodded, turned and headed out the doors, off down the street. It was a bit abrupt, but to be honest, I wasn't sure he was all there, if you know what I mean, so I didn't think too much of it. I did kick myself, though, as I realised I hadn't actually got his name, so 'J' would have to do.

With J gone, it seemed like I was the only one there, so I got changed, and got on with my workout. It was a little bit eerie, being all alone in that huge room. I'm used to having the presence of others to motivate me, to push me further than I'd otherwise go, just to show off a bit. On my own, I found myself working out at a much more leisurely pace; I was more careful than I normally would have been, if only because I didn't have a spotter.

The whole day I kept expecting someone else to come in. We'd get chatting, I thought, and I could maybe ask them to spot me, but the day slowly passed, and I was still alone. Occasionally I heard a noise from the changing rooms that I would have sworn was someone coming in, but there was no-one. Eventually, I showered, changed back, and headed home for a less-than-exciting dinner of chicken and beans.

The next day was the same, and the one after that. No matter when I went, the place was always empty, with no sign of J or anybody else. I wondered if somehow I'd been tricked into paying to use an abandoned gym or something, but it was well maintained and really clean, so someone was looking after it. In fact, thinking about it, I'd say it might have been the cleanest gym I'd ever used, although at the time I thought that was because I was the only one using it.

About five days into my time there, I finally met someone else. Her name was Marie Balandin, and she seemed just as surprised to see me as I was to see her. Apparently she had been using the gym for about two months and had, like me, thought she was the only one. She'd been off to see her sister down in Glasgow for a week, and was a bit shocked I'd turned up in her absence. We got to talking, though, and got on pretty well, so sure enough after a few minutes she offered to spot me.

Truth be told, I was a bit dubious she'd be able to keep up, but a few sets shut me right up. Whatever she was taking, she was a *lot* further along than me, and by the end I was struggling when spotting *her*. Still, there was a camaraderie that came from being the only two people in that weird place, and it didn't take long for us to become good friends, swapping diet tips and theories about what the deal was with J, whose real name, she claimed, was Jared.

There was one other advantage to knowing Marie was around – it helped me ignore the sounds from the locker room. The occasional thumps and creaks. I could just write it off as her being a bit clumsy. Even when I hadn't seen her come in.

Marie was apparently quite a big deal in some of the international women's bodybuilding competitions. I'd never followed them, but she showed me a few of her trophies once. The way she trained, though, it was intense, driven. More driven than I'd expect from someone with so many wins under her belt. She'd push herself way past the point of exhaustion every day, and for all the awards her body had gotten her, it sometimes seemed to me like she wanted to

destroy it. Often I'd find her staring at the mirror in the changing room, her gaze locked on her shoulders, moving them slowly up and down with a look of disgust on her face.

I didn't really think about it too much, though, as my own steroid course was starting to show results, and I was spending plenty of time in front of the mirror myself. It wasn't enough, though. I knew it wasn't enough. I knew I was going to have to go on another course as soon as my body had recovered from this one. Maybe even sooner.

I don't know how it would have ended if I hadn't lost my phone. I don't have much of a social life, so I didn't notice it was gone until I was getting ready for bed. It must have fallen out of my jacket pocket when I'd hung it up at the gym. I wouldn't have minded waiting until the next day, but it had my training diary on it, and I always spent ten minutes filling it in before bed. It was a small ritual, but an important one, and given it was just down the road, I figured I might as well go and see if the gym was still open. Since no-one ever seemed to be around, I figured, maybe no-one locked it overnight.

So at about half past eleven last Wednesday night, I found myself gently pushing open the door to my gym. It wasn't locked, just as I guessed, and everything inside seemed quiet. I headed through into the changing room, and there was my phone, where it had fallen in my locker. I grabbed it, and was just about to leave, when I heard movement coming from the gym itself, and nearly jumped out of my skin.

I should have left. I should have turned right around and marched out of that place, but instead I felt a… rage building inside me. Whoever was in there, it was almost midnight, how dare they come in sneaking around like that, trying to give me a heart attack! I set my face hard, and walked through, preparing to give Marie, or whoever it was, a piece of my mind.

The lights in the gym were off, but I could see movement over near the gymnastics equipment, someone swinging back and forth on the parallel bars. It was a smooth, rhythmic motion, down and around and up and over, around and over, up and down. Sometimes the movement flew up, releasing the bars for a moment, before deftly catching them on the way down. There was no sound as I got closer, apart from the faint slap of hands gripping and releasing the wood of the beams. If it was Marie, I'd never seen her doing anything like this before. I walked over, and turned on the overhead lights.

It was not Marie, swinging round and about on the bars. Marie only had two arms. Marie had legs. And Marie had a head. The thing that swung and flipped and twirled around the bars was nothing like Marie, though its flesh looked human enough. It did have a smile, though, stitched… right in the centre of its torso.

I screamed so hard I tore something in my throat. I don't know if it heard me. I don't know if it even had ears. But it wasn't alone, and the other things in that place *did* hear me, because as I ran back and out through the changing rooms, all the lockers were opening. What came climbing out of them had once been people, I'm sure of that,

and they called to me, offering to help ‘perfect’ me. To help me achieve my ideal body.

J was there, standing his full height. A distended, jagged body bared in all its twisted grandeur, and he shook his head in frustration. He said something, I think, but I couldn’t make it out. It might have been “too soon”.

I try to remember some of them in detail, the confusion of limbs and joints and muscles, but all I can remember is the happy, joyful way they called to me. Told me that the pain was worth it. It makes me sick that a small, sharp part of me wishes I’d stayed to listen.

I never went back. I called Marie and told her what happened, but she didn’t believe me. At least, I hope she didn’t. Because if she did, then some of the questions she asked make very worried for her indeed.

Statement ends.

MARTIN

[Deep breath] The, um… the supplemental materials that should go with this statement, providing more details on addresses, names, and stuff, seems to be missing, so we don’t have any way of tracking down the gym, or finding out the name the business might be operating under. Not without a 2013 copy of the Aberdeen Yellow Pages. A bit of relief, in some ways. I tried to contact Mr. Davenport about it, and did get through, but he told me to… um, he… he… wishes no further contact with the Institute.

Melanie looked into Marie Balandin, though. In 2011 and 2012, she did really well in several IFBB competitions, but it looks like she disappeared around the time of this statement. No missing persons report was ever filed, but there's no record of her anywhere after that.

The last official mention seems to be a police report filed on August 23rd, 2013, which lists her as a 'person of interest' in a series of animal mutilations on a farm about five miles west of Aberdeen. A bunch of sheep were found dead, with their femurs removed. Look, I, I know we're not meant to speculate in these bits, but… well, I just… I wonder what she was planning to do with them.

There. Well, that's, er… That's it.

[CLICK]

MAG091 – The Coming Storm

Statement #0172804–A

[CLICK]

MIKE

You're sure I can't get you a cup of tea?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, it-it's fine, really.

MIKE

Okay. You just seem a bit… jumpy, is all.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, I just, er… Coming in I thought… It's fine.

MIKE

Grand. Er, okay, what can I do for you?

[SOUNDS OF TEA BEING MADE]

ARCHIVIST

Er… You're… you're Michael Crew, right?

MIKE

It's Mike, please.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[SPOON NOISES]

[Leadingly] I'm from the Magnus Institute.

MIKE

Oh, you, uh, yeah, you said.

ARCHIVIST

I, er… I read… You feature in some of our statements!

MIKE

Oh. Statements of what?

ARCHIVIST

You… There was, there was a book? Er, two of them, at least. Er… *Ex Altiora, The Boneturner's Tale.*

You, uh, I think you threw a guy off a skyscraper in Paris.

MIKE

Hmm. Last chance for that cup of tea.

ARCHIVIST

I… Where did you get that scar?

[LONG SIGH AS THE SOUND OF RUSHING AIR RISES]

MIKE

And I was trying so hard to be polite.

[THE ARCHIVIST ATTEMPTS A SCREAM BUT TO NO AVAIL]

Hard, isn't it, trying to ask prying questions at terminal velocity? The air… it doesn't… leave your lungs like you expect it to. I mean, *I* know you're still sat down, *you* know you're still sat down. But whether your *body* knows it when I decide you hit the ground, that's… that's something I haven't made my mind up about, yet.

A little bit of privacy. Is that really so much to ask? I suppose it is, isn't it? From you and yours at least. We have a lot in common, really. After all, what, what good's the height, the terrifying draw of gravity, unless you, unless you really know the scale of what you're facing?

Maybe I'll let you live, allow you to drag yourself back down to your den, but… you need to learn some respect.

MIKE (STATEMENT)

My scar, wasn't it? Always the scar. Ironic, in some ways, because that was one the few marks that was only really ever physical. I got it when I was struck by lightning, age of eight. I was playing outside with a friend of mine, and the storm just came on quickly. That's really all there was to it.

Have you ever been struck by lightning? No. No, of course not. Not unless that's what happened to your hand, but I'm guessing that burn came from sticking it somewhere it wasn't wanted. And you still didn't learn. Well, imagine a white-hot, stinging pain, your whole body becoming rigid, like for an eternal moment you're frozen, you're trapped in a statue of yourself with a thousand needles of agony just erupting through you from the inside out. I don't know if it's **the** most painful thing that can happen to the human body, but… beyond a certain point trying to quantify and measure pain, it becomes pointless. That point is being struck by lighting.

The part that always bothered me was how I didn't remember it. Not really. The sensation's still vivid enough, but it exists in my mind completely detached from any actual memory. I remember the *feeling,* but not the event. One moment I'm playing amid raindrops the size of blueberries, and the next I'm in a white hospital bed, that acrid smell still surrounding me, and these lines of agony just carved through my skin.

The doctors told me there would be no long-term damage from my accident. They, they were wrong, of course, but the damage wasn't something they could see, so how were they to know? Sitting alone

in my room, tracing the lines of electricity with my finger, imagining my pain travelling these branching pathways. I was obsessed with it, and every time my finger reached the end of the line I felt a jolt of fear, because I, I knew they went further, went deeper than would show on my skin.

By age ten I was reading everything I could on what had happened to me. Electricity, Lichtenberg's experiments, meteorology. My parents thought it was simply my way of recovering, of processing my trauma, but there was something else there. I know that now.

Did you know that Lichtenberg figures are fractals? I didn't, not back then, but as they travelled along the length of my scars, I sometimes think like my fingertips could feel it. When I was twelve, curled under my bed to escape the pounding of the rain against my window, the roll of thunder that just rattled my skull, I began to travel them once again. My hands ran down and along those jagged, discoloured lines, every branch, every turn, my nostrils full of ozone, my veins full of fear. And they didn't stop. I knew where my scars ended, but… those I traced in the dark that night, they just went on and on and on, far beyond me and to somewhere that still flashed with that unspeakable white light.

That was the night everything changed. Before it I was odd, certainly, probably traumatised, and gripped with a terror of storms, but after that night, things were different. I think, looking back, that was when I called it. That was when it caught my scent.

It delighted in toying with my perceptions, making me believe a

storm was approaching, forcing me to run for shelter or desperately hunt for cover without warning. In the dark it would stand beneath my bedroom window, the light flaring, flashing the awful brightness of sheet lightning across my room.

I could never look directly at it. The bright, arcing glow of its insides almost blinded me when I tried. It was almost a man, but I could never be sure. Its strobing, flashing Lichtenberg organs changed and flickered too fast. It… never hurt me. Not once in all the years I was chased by its… malevolence. Of course, I know why that is now, but at the time it did nothing to dull my fear.

I remember when it found out where I lived. I had dreamed that night of shifting, branching avenues of light. I travelled them so fast I could feel my flesh peeling away, leaving nothing but the coursing, buzzing pain within me as I ran down these hideous corridors, aching for an end I knew simply wasn't there. I woke up screaming into the darkness. Walking to the window, I looked out over the tiny garden below. I was sixteen at the time, and the house I lived in had a small patch of green behind it, just fighting against the pressing grey of the city, the dull glow of the light pollution overhead. But where the back wall should have been, there was a small wooden gate.

I didn't feel the cold as I opened the back door, and walked out towards it. My… my tormentor was nowhere to be seen, but the blackened edges of the gate showed clearly it had passed by. Was I afraid? It's hard to remember now, but I have to assume that I was. I mean, I must have been. As I pushed the ancient hinges back to

reveal this darkened forest, how could I not have been?

It stretched away forever, I think, or as close to forever as the human mind can contain. The trees were long and spindly, their branches bare and reaching, as they grew down towards me out of the sky, their roots pulsing upwards into this roiling mass of clouds; the scorched and shattered trunks reeking of ozone.

I found *The Journal of a Plague Year* when I was seventeen. I was lucky, I suppose, that it wasn't anything worse. It infected the house, of course, brought it crashing down upon my parents in a collapse of diseased brick and septic foundations, but I escaped. And more than that, my eyes were opened to the powers that might save me. Might protect me from a past that followed me so **brightly** I could barely see it. But I knew that Filth was not for me. Buzzing flies and rot disgusted me, but they never spoke to my soul. I threw the book into a sewer, and began my hunt.

The Boneturner's Tale was next. Found tucked away in a waterlogged library basement, and deposited back in another. I played with it, but when I tried to shift the bits of myself I thought might set me free, the only shapes I could form with them were laced with that horrid, hunting fractal. My experiments weren't entirely pointless, though, they did have a truth to me. I learned that I was more than capable of killing, if it brought me closer to what I needed.

I spent some time with a small grey volume, I think it was in Cyrillic, that decided it was at home amongst my bookshelves. I couldn't read it, of course, but… when it tried to read me back, I

buried it on a lonely stretch of moorland.

Finally I found what I was searching for. In the back of a Chichester bookshop, I found my release. *Ex Altiora.* 'From the Heights'. The owner didn't want to part with it, a nasty, grubby little man who stank of sweat and self-importance, but I got it. And at last I had what I needed.

The thing that chased me, you see, it was an arcing branch of the Twisting Deceit, taken shape to follow me. But the shape it had taken more rightly belonged to the sky. To those same vast unknowable heights that blessed book wanted to take me. Falling had always held a special place in my heart, that wonderful border between terror and delight. When my parents would take me to the fair, I always found my way to the highest ride, the one that would just send me plummeting. It wasn't simply the rush of adrenaline, but something, something deeper, something that just gripped my soul with this ecstatic horror. And I knew within that book was something that could not only release me from my pursuer, but chain my being to that rush of wind and vertigo forever.

I don't remember that night in detail. The two most important events in my life, and I have clear memories of neither. I know it was the first storm, the first *real* storm, I had seen for almost ten years, but nothing else remains in my mind. There are echoes of resignation, I think, almost desperation. That *can't* be right, though. What reason would I have had not to jump? Not to become as I am now. Perhaps I just didn't know the true joy of vertigo. It doesn't matter. In the end I threw myself into the arms of that vast

emptiness, and I bound my tormentor to the book.

That's… that's all, I think. Since then I've embraced my new life; gladly fed that which feeds me.

A… uh, a Paris skyscraper, was it you said? I honestly, I, I can't say I recall it in detail, but that does… sounds about right. Sometimes it's hard to keep track.

MIKE

Hm. You know, that was… that was nice. I'm not, not usually the sort for speeches. That was… pleasant change. So.

[LOUD SOUNDS OF RUSHING AIR AND THE ARCHIVIST GASPS]

Off you go, then.

ARCHIVIST

[Breathing heavily] I, er… You –

MIKE

Archivist. Take my mercy and leave. You have touched something few ever walk away –

[DOOR KNOCKING]

I thought you said you came alone?

[GASPING GURGLES]

Hm.

[OPENS DOOR]

Can I hel– UGHH!

[SHORT-LIVED SOUNDS OF ALTERCATION]

ARCHIVIST

Detect… Detective?

DAISY

Shut up. He human?

ARCHIVIST

What?

DAISY

Is this man human?

ARCHIVIST

I… Er, no, I, I don’t think so. Not anymore.

DAISY

Right. What does it do?

ARCHIVIST

Er, he… It feels like, he makes you… Vertigo. Like you're falling.

DAISY

Has he killed people?

ARCHIVIST

Er, y-y-yes. Yes, a few, I think.

DAISY

Does he need to see you to do it? Does he need to speak?

ARCHIVIST

I-I-I don't know.

DAISY

Okay.

[ADDITIONAL SOUNDS OF KICKING]

Doubt he can do it in a coma. Now turn that off, and help me get him in the car. Don't try to run.

ARCHIVIST

What are you –

[PUNCH]

DAISY

What did I say about questions? I said turn that off!

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[SOUND OF WIND AND VOICES ARE SOMEWHAT MUFFLED]

DAISY

This is it.

ARCHIVIST

[Out of breath] So… so what now? You kill us?

…

DAISY

You think he's going to save you?

ARCHIVIST

What? What, no –

[GUNSHOT]

[THE ARCHIVIST CRIES OUT]

DAISY

Now… let's see the bag.

[THE ARCHIVIST IS STILL GASPING]

[SOUND OF ZIPPER]

DAISY

One wallet, brown leather, no cash. One packet cigarettes, Silk Cut. One lighter, gold, spiderweb design. One pocket knife… blunt. Huh. One set of keys to the Magnus Institute. And one tape record-

[VOICES BECOME CLEARER AS DAISY EXTRACTS RECORDER]

You sneaky little freak! You want to record this? Alright. I'd have to destroy it anyway.

ARCHIVIST

What, I? I, I didn't –

[RUSTLING NOISES]

Pl-please don't shoot me.

[SOUNDS OF PANIC]

Why are you doing this? Tell me!

[GURGLES MORE AS DAISY GRABS HIM ROUND THE THROAT]

DAISY

Stop… asking… questions!

That's how you want it? Fine. You brought a knife. So we go through the voicebox.

BASIRA

Daisy!

…

Daisy, put him down.

DAISY

You been following me, Basira?

BASIRA

Didn't need to. I know what you do here.

DAISY

He tell you?

BASIRA

He didn't need to. You're not that subtle. But I – I always thought you just killed monsters.

DAISY

I do!

[ARCHIVIST CONTINUES TO STRUGGLE]

BASIRA

Just let him go.

DAISY

You don't know what he **is.** You don't know what it's like to have your secrets *pulled out* like teeth, just because he asked?

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, I didn't –

DAISY

Shut up!

BASIRA

Daisy!

DAISY

Don't you… Don't you dare look at me like I'm crazy! It got you too, or do you think we gave him those tapes because we *like* handing out evidence?

ARCHIVIST

What?

BASIRA

That's not how it happened.

DAISY

No? You ask me to take a tape over to this murdering freak, and I'm all set to tear you a new one for it. But then I get the cassette in my hand, and suddenly all I want to do is deliver his *tapes,* and spill my guts.

BASIRA

So, so now you kill him?

DAISY

First him, then his creepy boss.

BASIRA

This is too far, Daisy. You know it is.

DAISY

He murdered two people, Basira. Maybe more. I've done one monster today, no reason not to do another.

ARCHIVIST

I didn't… I didn't kill anyone!

BASIRA

For god's sake look at him!

DAISY

Then who?

ARCHIVIST

I thi- I thi- I think it was Elias.

DAISY

Yeah. Well he's on my list too.

BASIRA

What if he asks?

DAISY

What?

BASIRA

You reckon he can mind control people. Make them tell the truth? Why not try it on Elias?

DAISY

…

He's got, he's got his own… He *knows* things. Would that work?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know. I, I could try.

BASIRA

Daisy! This might be our only chance to find out what's going on.

DAISY

…

Alright. But if this doesn't work, you're still dead.

ARCHIVIST

[Exhaling heavily] Yeah. Yeah.

What about Mike?

DAISY

Who? Oh.

Grab a spade.

[CLICK]

MAG092 – Nothing Beside Remains

Statement #0172804–B

[CLICK]

[SOUND OF TELEPHONE BEING HANDLED – THREE KEYPRESSES, THEN IT RINGS]

OPERATOR

999, what's your emergency?

ELIAS

Police, please.

OFFICER

Hello.

ELIAS

Yes, I'm calling to report a crime in progress.

OFFICER

Sir, are you in any immediate personal danger?

ELIAS

Ah, y-yes, not immediately, but I will be shortly.

OFFICER

Sir, where are you calling from? I need –

ELIAS

Could I speak to your Chief Inspector, please? Tell her Elias Bouchard is calling. Of the Magnus Institute.

OFFICER

Oh, er… Sure.

ELIAS

Thank you.

[SOUND OF PEN ON PAPER WHILST WAITING]

CHIEF

Chief Inspector Kaugery.

ELIAS

Ah, yes, er, good afternoon. Er, sorry to bother you. I believe you're looking for Detective Alice Tonner?

CHIEF

Do you know where she is?

ELIAS

I do, yes. Er, she should be here in about fifteen minutes.

CHIEF

I'll send some officers over immediately

ELIAS

That would be wonderful. Much appreciated.

[PUTS PHONE DOWN]

[FINISHES WRITING, COVERS PEN AND PLACES IT DOWN]

[STEADYING BREATH]

Statement of Barnabas Bennett, as given in a short letter to Jonah Magnus. April 9th, 1824.

ELIAS (STATEMENT)

My dear Jonah,

You must help me. If anyone is still here, it is you. I know your work brings you into contact with all sorts of fantastical terrors, so perhaps you might have it within your power to save me from this place. And it was you who warned me not to cross Mordechai

Lukas. Advice that I have, I'm afraid, disregarded.

It was a small enough thing, as I believed. A trifling debt I fell behind on. And when he met me in that garden, quiet as it always is with him, he demanded repayment. Well, I took it poorly, and laughed at his insistence. "Bring it before the courts," I told him. After all, what judge would find in his favour over mine? He simply regarded me silently for many minutes, staring with such a cast to his face that I could feel my resolution beginning to falter. "You shall pay me," he said at last, "in kind." Then he walked away.

Let me tell you, Jonah, I believed myself profoundly lucky that day as my hansom deposited me on the steps of my townhouse, a mood only slightly shaken by the impression that, as the cab pulled away, it seemed to have no driver that I could discern.

I am lucky, Jonah, but only insofar as that I never married. Never fathered children. Never let anyone get closer than my brother. The pangs of loneliness I feel are no more acute than my general longing for the company of my fellow man. I have no-one whose absence truly pains me.

And yet here, in this empty world, I cannot but spend these nights, these dreadful, silent nights, huddled and frozen in some terrible fear I find myself unable to name. I almost think I hear the mocking joy of my friends, but there is nobody here, and never shall be again. I try to read, to lose myself in something that is not the absence of humanity. How is it that the books speak to me of my isolation more acutely than the silence? For every treatise I read on

this world and its workings, the more I know I am to spend my time left in it without comfort or reprieve. With every tale of love or society I feel more keenly the absence of both.

I went to Egypt once with the Royal Society, to the temple of Ramses the Second in Abu Simbel. The place was remarkable, of course, but what sticks so keenly in my mind is the journey. Two days earlier, on the road from Aswan, I found myself separated from my fellow travellers. I do not know how it happened, but I spent two hours alone there, under the blazing sun, staring across the vast empty expanses of that ancient country. I revelled in the silence, then, embraced the loneliness like an old friend. But now that friend has devoured me, and I shall not emerge from its jaws. Not without your help.

And you must help me, Jonah. If anyone knows of what might break me from this dreadful place, it is you. I know that what is done by those I cannot see might be felt here – I have found glasses broken and pages torn that were not so the night before. It is my hope that if I leave a letter here, in your institute, you might find it, you might be able to save me. I have no other hope.

Please, Jonah, if you have any compassion within your heart, you will not leave me in this place.

Your loyal servant,

Barnabas.

ELIAS

Jonah Magnus did leave him in that place, John. He got the letter, oh yes, and was on good terms with Mordechai Lukas. He could have interceded, perhaps even saved him, but he did not. And it was not out of malice, or because he lacked affection for Barnabas Bennett: he retrieved those bones sadly enough when the time came. Bones that you can still find in my office, if you know where to look. No, it was because he was curious. Because he had to know, to watch and see it all.

That's what this place is, John, never forget it. You may believe yourself to have friends, to have confidantes, but in the end, all they are is something for you to watch, to know, and ultimately to discard. *This,* at least, Gertrude understood.

[SIGHS CONTENTEDLY]

Let us begin.

[FOOTSTEPS ECHO AND THE DOOR OPENS]

MARTIN

Uh, sorry to interrupt, er, J-John's here! And he's – well he's – He seems – He seems angry.

Um, *[splutters]* I actually think he's brought a coup-

DAISY

Bouchard.

BASIRA

Easy.

ARCHIVIST

Hello, Elias.

ELIAS

Goodness, John. Whatever happened to your hand? And your neck?

DAISY

[Satisfied smirk] That one was me.

ELIAS

You look a mess.

ARCHIVIST

[Chuckles] I've had a hell of a week.

ELIAS

Martin, would you be so good as to fetch Melanie and Tim. I think it would be worth their time to be here.

MARTIN

Er. R-Right. Okay. I'll just… what, go then?

[FOOTSTEPS, THEN DOOR CLOSES]

DAISY

Okay. Let's do this.

BASIRA

Er, John? Do you… You want to get this on tape?

ELIAS

No need, Basira. I've already got one running.

Now, you have something to ask me?

BASIRA

Go for it.

DAISY

Before I strangle the grinning bastard.

ARCHIVIST

Elias. Did you kill Gertrude Robinson? And Leitner?

ELIAS

[PLEASURED EXHALATION]

That's… That's quite nice, actually. Tingly… but sort of freeing. *[Chuckle]* You know, even Gertrude never properly tried to compel me. I always wondered –

BASIRA

Just answer the question.

DAISY

Or don't.

ELIAS

Oh, no need to worry about that. I just feel it's only fair to wait for your colleagues, John. They'll want to hear this too. Uh, it's also very important to me, in a personal capacity, that you understand I'm answering you of my own free will.

ARCHIVIST

[Angry] I don't care!

ELIAS

I know, but I do. There's so much of this place, of ourselves, twisted by forces far beyond us. I just wanted you to know –

[DOOR OPENS]

MARTIN

Uh, okay, okay, so I've got everyone, but I'm honestly kind of lost as to what's happening.

TIM

[Speaking over Martin] Yeah, I…

Oh, Christ, what is it now?

MELANIE

Er, yeah, same question, please.

ARCHIVIST

[Snarling] Elias here is about to confess his crimes.

TIM

What?

MELANIE

Oh.

Good?

MARTIN

Is, is that like, er…

ELIAS

Yes, I was just saying to John. It's very important to me you understand that no action I have taken has been controlled. I have done everything because I wished to.

DAISY

Get to the point.

ELIAS

[Sighs] Of course, Detective. So. For the avoidance of any doubt. I killed Gertrude Robinson because she intended to destroy the Archives. And I killed Jurgen Leitner because he was… an unnecessary complication. Likely to tell John too much, too early.

MELANIE

Bloody hell!

TIM

Oh, no.

MARTIN

So-So-S-Sorry, that guy was **Jurgen Leitner?**

ELIAS

It was.

BASIRA

Daisy, where do I know that name from?

DAISY

Oh, the Yousuf case. *An Introduction to Higher Anatomy.*

BASIRA

Ah… Oh, god! And you killed him? You sure we shouldn't be giving him a medal?

ARCHIVIST

Very sure.

MARTIN

And Sasha? Did you kill her too?

ARCHIVIST

Sasha died almost a year ago, Martin.

MARTIN

Wh-What?

TIM

Oh, god.

ARCHIVIST

When Prentiss attacked, something else, it… it… it replaced her. I still don't know how, but –

TIM

Goddamn it! This is… *[dejected, exasperated sigh]*

MARTIN

[Splutters incomprehensibly] It wasn't… Sasha?

ELIAS

He's right, Martin. The thing you remember as Sasha was nothing like her. It toyed with your memory. If I showed you a picture of the real Sasha now, you'd have no idea who it was.

MARTIN

So that thing we saw…?

ELIAS

Precisely. It finally tried to kill John. Then Leitner killed it. Then I killed Leitner. And I believe that brings us up to date. More or less.

ARCHIVIST

What about Michael?

ELIAS

What about him? An irritant. Interfering because he's bored, and he resents us. He has no purpose –

DAISY

Right. That's enough for me. Even got it on tape.

Everyone get back.

[SOUNDS OF CONSTERNATION AS DAISY DRAWS A GUN]

MARTIN

What?

BASIRA

Daisy, wait.

DAISY

Out the way.

MELANIE

Now hang, hang on, I thought you were about to arrest him.

DAISY

Get out the way!

MARTIN

John, do something!

[INTERCOM BUZZES AND ELIAS CHUCKLES]

DAISY

Don’t.

ELIAS

…

Excuse me.

[RINGING THAT CEASES UPON KEYPRESS]

Yes?

ROSIE (INTERCOM)

Elias, there are some police officers here to see you?

ELIAS

Ah, yes, thank you Rosie. Er, could you ask them to wait a minute or two?

ROSIE (INTERCOM)

Yep, will do.

ELIAS

There. That should make it even easier for you. Right, Detective? I know you were planning to kill me, but surely an arrest is a consolation prize?

[DAISY'S QUIVERING FRUSTRATION IS AUDIBLE]

BASIRA

Daisy?

ELIAS

Oh, didn't she tell you why she hadn't gone back to the station?

Allow me. She rightly suspected that I held evidence of various murders she had committed, and that I sent this to her superiors.

DAISY

…

ELIAS

She's quite the killer, your partner. All in the public good, of course. And she was correct, I spent some time acquiring that evidence. Or creating it. And while your superiors don't much care about the killings, the fact there is proof… They're not happy. And they want you brought in.

DAISY

Heh. So I kill you, and go to jail. I'll take that deal.

ELIAS

For someone who used to be a detective, you're remarkably reluctant to think things through. You think you're the only police officer eager to do violence and call it justice? No, there are plenty of other rabid dogs out there, mad with the hunt. And some of them have signed a Section 31. There are plenty of others your superiors can call on to clean up this mess.

BASIRA

Er… they wouldn't.

DAISY

Yeah. They would.

ELIAS

And anyone close enough to be implicated. They **will** kill Basira.

MARTIN

Okay, wai-wai-wai-wait, that's the police that you're talking about! Okay, they… they wouldn't…

Would they?

DAISY

I'm sorry, Basira.

BASIRA

Yeah.

ELIAS

If the officers down there take you away…

Oh, but perhaps I was wrong when I called them. Maybe it was a false alarm.

DAISY

What do you want?

ELIAS

Collateral.

[PAPER IS PUSHED ACROSS THE DESK]

DAISY

That… What?

ELIAS

A contract of employment. For Basira.

BASIRA

Uh?

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, no…

ELIAS

Sign it, and I'll send your ex-colleagues on their way.

DAISY

Basira, I…

TIM

Don’t do it.

BASIRA

There.

ARCHIVIST

Oh damn it.

ELIAS

Hmm.

[PUSHES BUTTON]

False alarm, Rosie. Could you apologise to the officers for me, and thank them for their time.

ROSIE (INTERCOM)

Oh. Um. Alright…

DAISY

So… what, you’re her boss now? Is that supposed to stop me?

ELIAS

Yes.

MELANIE

Um, I mean, she's still got a gun?

ELIAS

Ah, of course. Er, sometimes I forget how new you all are to this.

Basira is now tied to the Institute. All of you are. Like fingers on a hand. And I am the beating heart of it. Should I, or the Institute, be destroyed, you will all, unfortunately, follow suit.

MELANIE

Wait, what?

TIM

Yup, that sounds about right.

ELIAS

And it would not be a pleasant death.

DAISY

Bullshit!

ELIAS

Then shoot me. Just squeeze the trigger, and watch the only person you care about die screaming. Your last connection to humanity.

Do it.

BASIRA

Daisy…

[DAISY EXHALES, AND EVERYONE ELSE SIGHS AS SHE LOWERS THE GUN]

DAISY

What do you want?

ELIAS

The police are not the only ones who can find a use for your violence. I'm sure there'll be plenty here for you to do. Feel free to go where you like in the meantime. I'll be in touch.

DAISY

You piece of –

BASIRA

Daisy, it's… it's okay. We'll figure something out.

MELANIE

This is insane!

TIM

You get used to it.

ELIAS

Now that's taken care of, if you'll all give me and John a moment alone. I'm sure we have some things to discuss.

DAISY

Yeah.

MARTIN

Come on.

[FOOTSTEPS AND DOOR CLOSES]

ARCHIVIST

So.

ELIAS

Come on, John, there's really no need for the scowl.

ARCHIVIST

What do you want?

ELIAS

Honestly? To offer some congratulations. You're doing a lot better than I expected.

ARCHIVIST

Feels like all I've managed to do is… not die.

ELIAS

And believe me, that is a remarkably rare skill.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not getting any answers out of this, am I?

ELIAS

The easily-digestible sort that wipe away any doubt and fear, and neatly organise your new world into happy little columns? No. Not from me.

These are things you must discover on your own.

ARCHIVIST

Why?

ELIAS

[Sighs] What are you?

ARCHIVIST

I… The Archivist.

ELIAS

Precisely. It is your job to chronicle these things, to *experience* them, whether first-hand or through the eyes of others. To simply be told, well…

ARCHIVIST

It doesn't please your master?

ELIAS

Our master, John.

ARCHIVIST

[Emphatically] I never chose this.

ELIAS

You never wanted this, no. But I'm afraid you absolutely did choose it. In a hundred ways, at a hundred thresholds, you pressed on. You sought knowledge relentlessly, and you always chose to *see.* Our world is made of choices, John, and very rarely do we truly know what any of them mean, but we make them nonetheless.

ARCHIVIST

[Signs heavily] So what now?

ELIAS

You were doing fine before you forced this little scene. I suggest you continue.

ARCHIVIST

So it *was* you sending me statements.

ELIAS

A little bit of direction never hurt anybody. So to speak.

ARCHIVIST

[Chuckles] Directed towards what?

ELIAS

The Unknowing. I need you to stop it.

ARCHIVIST

Again with – What **is** "the Unknowing?" Exactly.

ELIAS

A ritual. The Stranger and its kin attempting to gather power enough to bring it closer.

ARCHIVIST

They're trying to, what, summon it?

ELIAS

Not exactly. These things that touch us, they… don't have a form of the sort that could exist in physical reality. So the Stranger wishes to remake that physical reality into something closer to itself. It

wants to make this world its own.

ARCHIVIST

And how do I stop it?

ELIAS

That is what you need to find out.

ARCHIVIST

No. You are not doing that. I know you have Gertrude's notes, her, her files. She was working on a way to stop this. Not to mention that apparently you can… effortlessly see anything at any time!

ELIAS

Hardly effortlessly, but I take your point.

ARCHIVIST

So you obviously know how to stop it. You *could* just tell me!

ELIAS

I could. But I believe that if I did so, you would fail. The Stranger is antithetical to us.

[THE ARCHIVIST SIGHS HEAVILY]

We thrive on ceaseless watching, on knowing too much. What we

face is the hidden, the uncanny, and the unknown. If you are to stop them, you need to get better at seeing. And my explaining things is simply not enough.

ARCHIVIST

And you can't just give me all of the statements?

ELIAS

John, even when you had them all at your disposal, you barely got through one statement a week. Why do you think that is? It takes its toll on you. And I *know* you've had problems with moderation.

ARCHIVIST

So it's… it's back to breadcrumbs, and statements, and risking my life talking to things that barely remember how to be human anymore?

ELIAS

For now. I'll be in touch.

…

[RESUMES WRITING]

Anything else?

ARCHIVIST

Am I… Elias, am I still human?

ELIAS

John, what does human even mean? I mean, *really?* You still bleed, you can still die. And your will is still your own, mostly. That's more than can be said for a lot of the 'real' humans out there.

…

You're worried about ending up like that thing, lurking in the dirt under the streets of Alexandria? Don't be. Just do what you need to, and you'll be fine. Understood?

ARCHIVIST

I suppose so.

ELIAS

Good. Well, I have work to be getting on with. I'll send you a Return to Work form, but don't worry about the doctor's note. Now, if there's nothing else?

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[CLICK]

MAG093 – Contaminant

Statement #9950503

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Lester Chang, regarding the cleaning habits of his father-in-uh… Er, er, right. Um…

[ADMIRAL MIAOWS, DEMANDING ATTENTION]

Hello Admiral, how've you been? I've missed you too. I just – I'm trying to…

[Sighs] Fine, you want a belly rub, alri– aaargh. Wrong hand, cat, wrong hand. Ah-hah… just… Sorry Admiral, it-it's been a hard few days.

[ADMIRAL STARTS PURRING]

Hope I haven't upset Georgie too much. How can she be mad? She's got you. Er, yep, that's your arse. Thanks for that. Look, I know, I love you too, but can I have my lap back? I kind of… I kinda need to – Aaah… Okay. Okay. Belly rubs. You don't have to worry about all this stuff, do you? A bit over your head, I guess. Bet the world

ends, and you do just fine.

[PURRING CEASES]

Oh, right. You done? Okay.

Statement of Lester Chang regarding the cleaning habits of his father-in-law. Original statement given March 5th 1995. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, H-Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

My father-in-law was always a fastidious man. When we first met, I made some jokes about OCD, but a few warning looks from Dani shut me right up. Greg Russell was very tidy and very clean, but balanced out, I always thought, by his wife Sandra, my mother-in-law. I know I'm meant to hate my mother-in-law, but honestly Sandra and I got on fantastically. Both of us were kind of messy, and found the chaos comforting and homely, and we had very similar senses of humour. I never figured out whether she and Greg complemented each other, or drove each other up the wall. When I first met them I was horrified by the way they talked to each other, convinced I was about to witness the messy divorce of my girlfriend's parents. But twelve years later, they were still together, and I found myself privy to their more tender moments. To be honest, I'm still not sure how *healthy* their relationship was, but it

seems to work for them, and Danielle, my wife, didn't seem to have inherited any of their more *confrontational* habits when it came to our relationship.

All in all, I enjoyed seeing them two or three times a year on holidays, but was kind of glad they lived all the way up in Newcastle. Dani would talk to them on the phone for hours, and I'd get all the updates, but crucially, I didn't have to do much of the interaction myself. And that was more than enough for me.

Then, last year, the… unthinkable happened. Hereditary conditions, right? They… They can really ruin… everything. The doctors told us the chances of it happening were astronomical, like we should be proud of having something so unlikely march in and ruin our lives, but within ten months both myself and Greg were widowers. I think I must have spent more nights that year in hospital chairs than I did in my own bed. But November rolled around, and I had it all to myself. You don't realise how big a bed can be until something like that happens.

I don't really know what I expected it to do to my relationship with my father-in-law. I mean, I didn't really expect anything at all. If you'd asked me at the time, I probably would have said that it should have brought us closer together, that we'd probably end up leaning on each other for support. But that never really happened. Instead, he stopped contacting me completely. He still answered the phone when I called, but was *polite* when I went to check upon him. Every bit of communication had to be instigated by me.

And he had gotten… cleaner. I didn't think it was possible, but every time I went over there, the smell of bleach was almost overwhelming. More often than not he was wearing rubber cleaning gloves when he opened the door, and as I walked around I could feel his eyes making note of everywhere I walked, everything I touched. I tried to talk to him about it, suggest he get help, but whenever I mentioned it he would try to change the subject, and talk about television or news, though… if I tried, it became clear he didn't actually follow either.

Finally, I decided I just couldn't stand it any more. I sat him down, and told him that if he didn't talk to someone about his compulsions, I was going to have to set something up for him. I told him that whatever he was doing, it wasn't the right way to deal with Sandra and Dani's death. I didn't handle it well. I was still deep in grief myself, and I almost broke down, pleading with him, telling him it wasn't healthy. When I said that, he laughed. He actually threw his head back and laughed. It was one of the most unnerving sounds I'd ever heard.

Greg stood up, walked over to a small cabinet in his kitchen, and opened it to reveal row upon row of individually packaged miniatures of gin. He picked up one of them up and inspected it, checking the top and bottom, and examining the seal to make sure it was unbroken. Then, in one swift motion he opened the tiny bottle, and emptied it down his throat. He did this three times before he finally looked back at me. His gaze was softened by the alcohol, but it still looked like an almost physical effort for him to

force out the words.

“There is mould in my drain.” That’s all he said. Not all that strange a sentence, all things considered, especially in that context. But something in his face, something in the way he pressed those words out through his lips made me suddenly feel cold all over. I made my excuses and left. He didn’t look up as I closed the front door behind me.

I tried to forget, tried to just move on and ignore it. If he didn’t want my help, then I had no business trying to force it on him. But I couldn’t do it. He was Dani’s father, my last connection to her. I don’t believe in ghosts, or the afterlife, or anything like that, but I knew she would have wanted me to do *something.* Dani never gave up on anyone.

Work wasn’t expecting me back for another few weeks, and Dani had had a solid life insurance policy, so there wasn’t any problem booking a decent hotel room for a week in Newcastle. I knew that my father-in-law would never allow me to stay in his home, not at that point, but he couldn’t stop me being nearby. So I started to check in on him every day. I brought him hot meals, and talked to him for hours, even when he didn’t want to talk back. But none of it seemed to weaken the cleaning compulsion that had taken hold of him. If anything, after a few days I noticed that I had adopted the habit of cleaning my hands a second time before leaving the hotel bathroom. Greg wouldn’t let me use his.

On the fifth day, I did see inside his bathroom, though. I won’t go

into details, but suffice to say my use of it was over his protests. It was just as clean as the rest of the house. Beyond clean, really, as I could see some of the enamel fittings had been worn down, and the tile grouting and sealant around the sink were starting to corrode. I shook my head and turned to leave, but as I did so, I saw a small flash of colour in the bath. I pulled back the white curtain and looked down. Surrounding the edges of the plug's pristine chrome was a small halo of purple. I leaned over to get a closer look. It appeared to be some sort of fungus, scrubbed away so only the faintest traces remained. There was a spongy, fibrous look to it, and I had the sudden image of long, soft tendrils stretching away down through the pipes. It was the colour of a fresh bruise and smelled sour, like old milk.

I don't know how long I stood staring at it, but when I looked up, my father-in-law stood in the bathroom door with a look on his face that was a mixture of anger and embarrassment. He started screaming at me about privacy and respect, about how he was a clean man, and knew how to keep his house pure. He had a lump of wire wool in his hands, and I left quickly, because…. I was somehow sure that if I didn't he was going to start scrubbing me with it.

I didn't go back the next day, both to let him cool off, and because I need to spend some time convincing myself that I shouldn't just head home and leave him to whatever the hell he thought was going on. I couldn't get that mould out of my head, though. When I went out to eat, I kept thinking I could smell that awful, sour odour,

and I ended up just sitting there, watching my burger as it cooled down, searching its surface for any signs of… something. At one point a fly landed on it, and I just found myself nodding, like everything was exactly as it should be. I don't know. I wasn't sleeping well; my sheets felt odd. Slimy, somehow, though whenever I turned the lights on to look… there was nothing out of the ordinary.

I did go back. Of course I did. He wasn't well. I know I should have done something, forced some help on him somehow, but even now I'm not sure how I could have done it. Greg didn't answer the door, but it wasn't locked. The house was still spotless, but the cleanliness didn't look quite as *fresh* as it had before. Like it had been cleaned earlier, and just hadn't been used since then. My father-in-law was sat on the sofa in the same clothes he'd had on the last time I'd seen him. His skin was slick with sweat, and his face was blank. I called out to him and he looked up, but there was… no recognition in his eyes.

I glanced behind him, and saw the bathroom door was closed. Not just closed, but **sealed**. All the edges and the cracks had been packed through with sealant. He'd even nailed extra wood to the bottom of the door, and sealed all the crevices of that. It didn't do anything to stop that sour smell, which seemed to pulse and ooze from the doorway, and as I stared at the edges of it, I noticed the sealant was laced through with thin tendrils of purple.

I turned to Greg to say something, to ask a question, but then… I noticed something. I began to realise that, aside from his head,

every inch of skin was covered with clothes, with gloves, or a scarf. Whereas before he had been dressing to be sterile, now it seemed like he was dressing to keep covered. And then I looked into his face. I saw the thin crust of purple around his eyelids, the corner of his mouth, and the colour of veins in his bloodshot eyes.

He started to move, to open his mouth, but I didn't give him the chance. I didn't even stop to consider alternatives, I just turned on my heel and ran. Some people might call me a coward, but I am absolutely sure those people would not have made it out of that house alive.

I know I should have called someone, told the police or the ambulance service, but I was in shock. I didn't know what I'd just witnessed. I still don't, not really. I went back one more time, but I didn't even get past the front gate before the smell hit me, and I turned back. It looked like my father-in-law was moving, though. I remember, it was Breekon and Hope doing it; they had a depot a ways down the street, and I recall thinking how odd that was, using a couple of local lads with such a small van, given how much furniture they were having to load up from Greg's house. I asked them about it, about where he was, but they just looked at each other and mumbled something in Polish or Russian, and then they completely ignored me. I was going to press the issue, but I got another wave of that dreadful, rotten smell from the house, and realised I had to leave before I was sick.

The next time I went back the place was empty, the smell was gone, and I never saw my father-in-law again.

Statement ends.

ARCHIVIST

[Heavy sigh] Elias gave me this before I left. Said it might help me "clarify my next move". I should really have waited, got some rest before I recorded it, or until I'd had a chance to move out of Georgie's. I've already stayed here too long. It's not fair, putting her in danger like this. Or the Admiral.

God, if Daisy had come while I was here…

I wasn't sure what Elias meant by "my next move" until the end of this statement. Horrible as whatever it was that overtook Greg Russell must have been, it seems less than entirely relevant to the current situation. But Breekon and Hope? Speaking Russian and helping transport a victim of… whatever dark power rules over disease and rot. And insects, maybe? I was just about convinced that they served the Stranger, and their speaking Russian might well support that if it ties them to the Circus, but… this is not the first time they've been delivering things that seem to be tied to other beings. Are they a neutral party, carting round whatever horror needs delivering, just a piece of otherworldly infrastructure? Or are they fully part of the Stranger, just serving as allies of convenience for other things that need to be moved?

Most importantly, though, it mentions a depot in Newcastle. Sasha checked on the Nottingham depot when they first came up… huh, almost two years ago now. A different time. But that had long been

gentrified into luxury flats. Sasha never mentioned there might have been other depots, and I never asked. I need to do some digging, because if the place is still there, if – if the building is still standing, I might just have an idea where to –

[SOUND OF KEY IN LOCK, THEN DOOR OPENING]

Er…

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

GEORGIE

So, what? You were just packing this away?

ARCHIVIST

Georgie, I just, I needed to do *one* more.

GEORGIE

I asked you not to record them here.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, I… I honestly forgot. It's been a hell of a week.

GEORGIE

Yeah, not just for you. What, you think you just disappear for five days, then turn up looking like the, like the end of *Die Hard,* and I'll just write it off? 'Classic John, what an interesting life he must lead.'

ARCHIVIST

No, I –

GEORGIE

Where have you been? And what happened to your hand?

ARCHIVIST

I don't want to talk about it.

GEORGIE

Tough.

ARCHIVIST

Look, I'm moving out anyway, so just… just forget it. I'm out of your life. Alright?

GEORGIE

No.

ARCHIVIST

No… No, what?

GEORGIE

You leave, you don't get your tapes back.

ARCHIVIST

What?

GEORGIE

When you disappeared, I took the tapes you recorded, and locked them away. Honestly, I thought I might need them as evidence. You want them back, you tell me what's happening.

ARCHIVIST

Georgie, please… You'll think I'm… You'll think I'm delusional.

GEORGIE

I really hope so, John. Because right now I just think you're a dickhead.

ARCHIVIST

…

Alright.

[Sigh] Okay. It started when I got that job at the Magnus Institute, you remember?

GEORGIE

Yeah, they do… studies on ghosts and psychics and that, right?

ARCHIVIST

More or less. Well, I was hired as a researcher, and that was fine. I-I enjoyed it. Nothing really paranormal, but life was… fine. It was good.

Then, a couple of years ago, the Head of the Archives, Gertrude Robinson, she disappeared, and Elias, my boss, chose me as her replacement.

GEORGIE

Why?

ARCHIVIST

What?

GEORGIE

Why would he give **you** that job?

ARCHIVIST

Uh… He thought I could do it?

GEORGIE

You were a researcher, John – I mean, that's, that's a long way from an archivist. And I know you don't just have a Library Science degree hanging around.

ARCHIVIST

I – I mean it's all the same… data and, and papers and stuff. Isn't it?

GEORGIE

Not really.

ARCHIVIST

Uh… Well, I was given some assistants. Tim, Sasha, and Martin. They helped.

GEORGIE

Were any of **them** trained in Information Science?

ARCHIVIST

I don't… No? I mean, I haven't even got to the weird bit yet.

GEORGIE

Now, I know you talk a good game, John, but hiring you out of the blue as an archivist is pretty weird.

ARCHIVIST

Head Archivist.

GEORGIE

Well that *does* make sense, actually. In context.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not sure I follow?

GEORGIE

What I mean is, if there's no-one above you, there's no-one to point out you're doing everything wrong.

ARCHIVIST

Look, can we put my professional competence to one side, please. Because I'm trying to tell you monsters are real!

GEORGIE

Okay.

ARCHIVIST

[Confused] Okay? Okay, what?

GEORGIE

Okay, I know monsters are real and I… assume there's more?

ARCHIVIST

I… erm, you, you know?

GEORGIE

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Y-You just believe me?

GEORGIE

Yeah, I mean, it's not *belief*. I've seen them.

ARCHIVIST

You've seen monsters?

GEORGIE

Not the time, John.

ARCHIVIST

Right, it's… it's just, I think I'm turning into one.

GEORGIE

Really? That's… not great.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. Ever since I took this job, I've felt a compulsion to read out some of the statements. The ones that really touched the supernatural. And when I do… I… I feel them. I feel their confusion and fear. I tried to write it off, but… And, and I can make people tell me their stories. Anytime I ask a question, people just… answer.

GEORGIE

Okay, well that bit… *will* need some proof.

ARCHIVIST

Fine, er…

What is something you would never choose to tell me?

GEORGIE

When we first met I thought you were putting on that accent to sound more impressive.

Oh. Oh, John… I'm so sorry.

ARCHIVIST

Oh… No, it's alright. I, er, I mean, I-I guess I did exaggerate it. It's a long time ago, anyway.

Proof?

GEORGIE

Yeah. Yeah, I guess so.

ARCHIVIST

The Institute is… There are beings. Like, weird gods, or powers, or… something. They're outside our universe somewhere, but they push through sometimes in the form of these monsters. A-A-And sometimes they choose people to be… er, servants? Conduits?

GEORGIE

Avatars?

ARCHIVIST

Avatars! But they end up getting these abilities, and they lose a lot of their *self*. Sometimes all of it.

GEORGIE

And you think… that's what's happening to you?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Yes. The Institute serves one of these beings. A-At least, Elias, who runs the place, does. Since accepting the Archivist job, I-I've been… different. A-And I can't quit or, apparently, do any violence to him. I'm bound somehow.

GEORGIE

That does at least explain why he picked you.

ARCHIVIST

Uh?

GEORGIE

If your job is asking questions, I mean. You were always the one who pushed too far, and asked smart-arse, awkward questions. I always was surprised you never got punched.

ARCHIVIST

Well, I think that bit of luck's run out.

GEORGIE

So, you've discovered your boss is evil, making you kind of evil, and you can't quit, so you… fled here?

ARCHIVIST

And… there were some… murders.

GEORGIE

Oh. Ah. I assume that's why I had the police asking after you?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, they came here?

GEORGIE

It's fine, you were asleep. Anyway, that –

ARCHIVIST

Wh–

GEORGIE

– *that* makes sense, but it doesn't explain the hand.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, that was… that was one of the other… ‘avatars’.

GEORGIE

Of your guy, or…?

ARCHIVIST

No, no. My… my patron is focused on knowledge and observation. Elias calls it The Eye, but I’ve also heard it called Beholding, or Ceaseless Watcher… a lot of names. This one was… The Lightless Flame, or, or I think she called it The Desolation. It’s burning, destruction, pain. All the bad bits of fire without any of the light or joy.

GEORGIE

Sounds lovely. And you were meeting them because…?

ARCHIVIST

One of the powers, The Stranger, is… Its beings are trying to perform a ritual they call The Unknowing. Apparently it’s meant to remake the world, bring it closer to their master. I don’t know exactly what that means, or where it is, but… I need to stop it.

GEORGIE

Jonathan Sims, are you trying to save the world?

ARCHIVIST

I…

Yeah. I… I guess I am.

But, but I need information, so I've been trying to find as many like me as possible. I've got a lot of leads: a weird Russian circus run by Gregor, or, or Nikola, Orsinov, and these weird van drivers that seem to turn up everywhere, and mannequins and taxidermy and skin, and all sorts, but… nothing solid.

Elias has been sending me statements, apparently to prepare me, whatever **that** means, but some of the people I've been talking to have been… very dangerous. I'm starting to feel like a bit of a punching bag, to be honest. Would be nice to meet a monster, and **not** have a scar to show for it.

GEORGIE

Well. Shit.

ARCHIVIST

So… You believe me?

GEORGIE

Yeah. Yeah, I do.

ARCHIVIST

[Exhales] Oh, thank god.

GEORGIE

John. These, these things you're talking about? Is… Is one of them, like, Death?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, yes. I-I-I think so. There's one I've heard called "The End". Why?

GEORGIE

…

I'll make us a cup of tea.

[CLICK]

MAG094 – Dead Woman Walking

Statement #0172904

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Right.

GEORGIE

Right.

ARCHIVIST

And… you're… *sure* you're okay with this? And with me recording?

GEORGIE

I mean… no? But… You told all *your* stuff, so… I mean, it's just fair. I think.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, maybe I know something that can help.

GEORGIE

No, it's not, erm… There are some things it doesn't help to know

more about.

ARCHIVIST

[Sotto voce] Right.

GEORGIE

So how does this work?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, you just… tell your story.

GEORGIE

Right.

ARCHIVIST

Would it help if I… ‘asked’?

GEORGIE

Erm… Yeah, yeah. Maybe.

ARCHIVIST

Okay. Statement of Georgina Barker regarding the last words of a possible corpse. Recorded direct from subject, April 29th, 2017.

Statement begins.

So… what happened?

GEORGIE (STATEMENT)

It was my first year of university, before I'd met you. I was still studying English at Balliol back then, and trying to hide how poor my family was from everyone else. None of them *said* anything, of course, but whenever they talked I could count the seconds before I got lost. Before one of them made a reference, or assumed something about my life, and I realised I was out of my depth. I'd learned what a punt was; there couldn't have been that much more, surely?

I'd read so many books, and nobody knew any more about my subject than I did, but the way my classmates all seemed to read Latin, or reference philosophers I'd never heard of… I'd, I'd never been able to travel outside the country, but everyone seemed to assume I went skiing every winter. I felt I'd wandered onstage without a script. I felt boring, like I was being judged on all the experiences I'd never been able to have. And I always remember their faces when I'd get excited, and a hint of Scouse would creep into my voice. Like I was some sort of… curiosity. I was scared all the time, terrified that someone would see through me, see the fraud I felt like I was.

There was only one person I really felt myself around. Her name was Alex Brooke, and she was a medical student at Corpus Christi. She'd grown up in an ex-mining town in the Black Country, though I can't remember which one, and she seemed to feel the same way I did. But where I was anxious and self-conscious, she was angry. I never met anyone who could skewer the pompous dickheads like

she could. I think she actually head-butted some rich kid from Christ Church once.

She was a couple of years above me, and we met after we both went to some self-satisfied theatre thing in my second week. We simultaneously decided to ditch it halfway through when they started talking about the 'highlights of the last season at the National'. We went for a drink instead, and just like that we were inseparable.

Alex was always so confident, so… utterly unafraid. I always admired her for that, even if I sometimes found it almost as intimidating as the posh boys quoting Latin. I think she made a point of never letting anything shake her. Even when talking about the most morbid subjects, she never lost that smile.

And as a medical student, there were plenty of morbid subjects to talk about. She'd discuss her dissections with me, I think just to watch me squirm a bit, and talk about how hungry she always got at the smell of preserved brain. Apparently, it's exactly like tinned tuna. She liked to make that observation just before taking a big bite of her sandwich. I don't think I actually ever saw her eat tuna any other time. Maybe she didn't even like the stuff, she just wanted to make a point.

I'm sure you remember all the protests back then. I went on a few marches myself, so it didn't exactly come as a huge surprise to hear that there was a group occupying one of the faculty buildings. What *was* strange about the whole thing was nobody seemed to exactly

know what the group were protesting, or exactly when it had started. They'd taken over part of the Medical Sciences building, though, so I think *most* people assumed it was some sort of scientific ethics or animal rights thing. The staff were all very quiet about it.

Alex was loudly angry about it, as was her way. I wasn't sure exactly what it was about, but reckoned I was probably on the protestor's side, or close to it, but she was having none of it. Apparently classes were being changed all over the place to avoid that part of the building, and it was playing havoc with her schedule.

One night, when we were both through a few pints in Balliol bar, I mentioned that it was a bit weird there weren't more police around, if they were illegally occupying the place, and she got this little light in her eye. This wrinkle round the edges that I knew meant trouble. I asked her what she was planning, but she just shook her head, and gestured to get another drink.

I didn't see her again until the following afternoon. She called me up out of nowhere and demanded we have lunch. I didn't point out that it was four. There was something in her voice that made me think she hadn't slept, and not because she'd partied the night away. I pushed a plate of chips and sausage towards her, but she barely looked at it. Finally, she looked up at me, and I saw something new in her face. I saw fear. "They were just… sitting there," she said.

Apparently, Alex had found her way back into the Medical Science

building after putting me drunkenly to bed. God knows what she was planning to do; I don't think even she was completely sure. Something about catching the protesters sleeping and bothering them the way she thought they'd been bothering her. She'd found her way to the rooms they'd taken over, and was about to go in, when she'd glanced through the small window on the swinging double doors.

They were lying on the floor, she told me. All of them. Not like they were sleeping, but like they'd just… collapsed, motionless, where they had been standing. There were no placards, no signs, just a couple dozen normal-looking students fallen to the floor.

Their chests moved up and down slowly, so Alex was sure they'd been alive, but… their eyes stared vacantly into the space in front of them, and everything else about them seemed lifeless and empty. Some of them were lying with their heads or legs at odd, uncomfortable-looking angles, but they either didn't notice or didn't care. They all seemed to have fallen away from a single, central point in the room. Kneeling there was the only figure who hadn't collapsed.

She was an older woman, Alex said, and was almost completely naked. Her skin was pale and her head was shaved. Like the others, she was still, with only the movement of her chest showing she was still alive, but unlike those on the floor, her eyes moved. They gently swept from one side of the room to the other, like she was searching for something.

Then those eyes settled on Alex, staring in through the door. The eyes didn't light up, they didn't narrow, or show any sign they'd registered her existence. They just stopped moving and looked at Alex, as though waiting for her next move. And it was at that point Alex had recognised the woman, and run.

Obviously I wanted to know who the woman was, and I demanded Alex tell me, but she just told me to… Well, she said she didn't want to say, and pushed her now-cold lunch away from her. I wasn't letting her get away that easily, and I pressed the point. Who was this woman with the shaved head? Where had she seen her before?

Finally, Alex admitted she'd seen the woman during classes at the Medical Building. Was she a tutor? What was her name? Alex looked me right in the eyes. "They weren't allowed to tell us their names."

It took a few moments to work out what she meant, and when I did I felt dizzy. Alex had such absolute certainty in her voice, but she had to be wrong. It was impossible. I had no idea what to say, and all I could manage to do was blurt out, "Tuna?" She stared at me for a few seconds, then shrugged, and looked to the floor.

We sat there in silence for a long time, trying to understand what had just been said. I mean, there was no way that there could be something in a university building causing students to collapse, and nobody was taking any steps to deal with it.

Especially if it involved one of the cadavers, it just wasn't possible. But the only other explanation I could come up with was that Alex was lying, and I just needed to look at her to know that was even less likely. So I did what I felt was the only thing I could do in that situation. I told her I'd go with her if she wanted to take a second look. She didn't, but we went anyway.

It was Saturday, and the place was eerily quiet. Even without classes or labs, there were always a few students hovering about, going to and from places, eager to get some work done when everywhere wasn't so crowded. But all we passed heading into the building was a single police car, sat empty, just slightly mounting the kerb. The door to the Medical Science building stood open; it was a bright day, but the hall stood dark. Alex looked at me, just once, as if asking whether I was sure about doing this. I wasn't, but… I still nodded.

We stepped inside. The building was cool and quiet, with just the faint drone of the air conditioning in the background. I'd never actually been inside before, but Alex's steps were confident in their direction, even if she wasn't confident in her purpose. Finally, she pushed open a pair of doors to one of the teaching rooms, and… I saw the scene she had described.

There were the students, lying on the floor. But not just students. I saw faculty and even a policeman slumped there like the others. What Alex hadn't mentioned was how grey they all seemed. Not in the sense they were sickly, but… like they'd had the colour simply drained away from them. And knelt in the middle was the woman.

Her skin seemed grey as well, but in her it was *clearly* the colour of death. It didn't matter that her ribs rose and fell like she was breathing, even if Alex hadn't told me before there would have been no doubt in my mind what she was.

Her eyes settled on us with that same disinterested stare. No-one moved. Not us, not the corpse, and not the bodies on the floor. There was nothing but the sound of breathing, and maybe the faintest whimpering cry from somewhere among the fallen. Then, very slowly, without any sense of urgency, the dead woman began to stand up. I remember what it was like only vaguely, like trying to describe a dream long after you've woken up from it.

As the woman got closer, I could see something in Alex tighten, wind so taut that it finally snapped. She lunged forward, grabbed the corpse by its shoulders, and began to scream into its face. What did it want? What had it done? Demanding answers. The dead woman with the shaved head ignored her grip, leaned close to her neck and opened her mouth.

For a moment I had visions of teeth sinking into Alex's flesh, of arterial spray coating the clean, white laminate, but all that passed between them was a whisper. Something soft spoken into Alex's ear. Her arms dropped to her sides, and she turned to look at me.

Her eyes were different. They were still hers, and I could tell they still knew me, but something in them was gone. As my gaze met hers, Alex gave a simple, small shrug, so slowly, it was as if every ounce of will she had went into that one small gesture. Her head

drooped, staring at the floor, and she gently lowered herself down to lie there.

And just like that, I was on my own. It feels strange to think that even then I couldn't find the strength to run. If I'm feeling generous to myself, I try to believe it's because I was unwilling to abandon Alex, or maybe the thing had some power to keep me there, but honestly, it was fight, flight or freeze. And I froze.

I saw the dead woman approaching me. Smelt the chemicals that kept her from rotting, saw her lean towards me, saw her lips begin to form words. In desperation I slammed my hands over my ears and shut my eyes, willing myself not to hear, not to understand. As far as defences go, it was basically nothing, but I still think it saved me, at least a bit. I still heard the words.

"The moment that you die will feel exactly the same as this one."

And in an instant I understood. There's no… *difference* between the present and the future, no other me that will suffer the indignity of death while I live on. It's all a single moment, and there's… there's no difference between that *last* moment that ushers us out into oblivion and the one we experience now. The promise of a cold and lonely eternity in the grave would have been a mercy; at least it would be eternal. But everything ends, even the universe, even time. And… that means it has always already ended.

I felt every feeling within me boil up: anger, despair, joy, hope, fear. Especially fear. They overwhelmed me, and burned up with

the monumental realisation of the scale we existed on. Not the meaningless vastness of the universe, but the… the smallness of it.

And I realised I was in my bed. According to my phone, I had been for several days. I numbly got myself some water, and ignored my weeping mother. She tried to hug me, but her arms just slid off my limp shoulders.

And that was my life for several months. Eventually, the memory began to fade, and I started to feel again. I took the year out of university under the umbrella of 'medical reasons', and by the time I met you I was, well, I don't think I'll ever be the same person I was before, but I had started being able to actually live again.

I never learned for sure what happened to the people in the Medical Science building, or the dead woman. Someone said a police van and ambulance had turned up in the night, and taken them all away, but I couldn't find anything more on it. None of them came back to the university, and I never saw Alex again.

There was one thing that never returned to me afterwards, though. Since that day, I've never been able to feel afraid. My fear's just… gone. I'm not foolhardy. I can still recognise danger, and I understand the likelihood of harm, but actual fear? Simply not something I experience anymore. And I've never been able to figure out if it was cauterised, or… if it was stolen.

GEORGIE

So that's it.

ARCHIVIST

I see. That, um… I mean, that –

GEORGIE

Explains some things?

ARCHIVIST

A bit. I can't believe you never told me.

GEORGIE

Well, I can't believe you didn't tell me you were on the run from the police over two murders, so…

ARCHIVIST

No, you – you're right, I…

GEORGIE

Are you alright? You look like you're about to keel over.

ARCHIVIST

Uh, no, I – I just… Ther-there's been a lot of statements, in not a lot of time. I'm… I'm exhausted. I kind of wish I knew, uh, knew even *one* person who genuinely wasn't involved.

GEORGIE

Maybe that's why you thought of me?

ARCHIVIST

Hm?

GEORGIE

I mean, it's been years, and there must be other old friends you lost touch with. Maybe you did know?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, maybe. I, uh…

GEORGIE

[Sigh] It's alright, John, you sleep. I'll tidy up here.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I, uh… Yeah.

[CLICK]

MAG095 – Absent Without Leave

Statement #9770211

[CLICK]

MARTIN

Right. Statement. Another statement. *[Sigh]* Fine.

Martin Blackwood, Archival Assistant at the Magnus Institute, recording statement number 9770211, statement of Luca Moretti, given November 2nd, 1977.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

There is no glory in war. I learned that early. Maybe there was once, riding out onto the battlefield with your banner held high, a warhorse below you, and a lance in your hand. But no, probably not even then. It's just fear. Fear that some unseen enemy might end your life from a mile away with a tank round or an artillery shell. Fear that you might look another man in the eyes the moment before he pulls a trigger and takes your life. Fear that you might have to look in his eyes before you do the same. I joined up because I wanted to serve my king, because I thought that out there, on the field of battle, I could be the *hero* my country needed. But it turned out I was only ready to kill for my country right up until the

moment I had the chance.

They never tell you how difficult it is to take a human life. They tell you the enemy are monsters, an evil force sweeping across our fair land, burning and murdering because that's all the enemy knows. They try to keep you far away, firing round after round from whatever hidden spot you've found. All so you don't look your enemy in the eyes. Because they're just people.

That's not to say I never killed anyone. I honestly don't know. A battle is a terrible, confusing place. I fired my gun plenty, and many Allied soldiers ended up dead. I can't be sure none were because of me. But, I never took a life with full knowledge and intention. Not during the war, at least.

I wasn't a fascist. I know that's always the claim people try to make, but I honestly had no time for Mussolini. I'll admit there was a certain *poetry* to D'Annunzio's words, which brought me close to believing in him on occasion, but when he made way for "Il Duce"[1] I rapidly lost interest. I had no time for that bald, pouting fool, strutting about and preening. I, like my father, served for the King. I wasn't happy he had thrown his lot in with the Fascists, but loyalty was always a failing of mine. That said, I despised Communism, and under Mussolini's rule the military enjoyed freedom and prominence as never before. I ignored, though, the rumours of what my brothers-in-arms were doing in Libya.

By the time the war broke out, I had been a soldier for most of my adult life, but I had never seen full combat, despite having made the

rank of Maresciallo capo[2] in the 4th Alpini. We were trained in mountain warfare, some of the toughest men I ever knew, and eager to see combat, even if to do so, we would stand side by side with Nazis. True battle was worse than I could have imagined. We were trained and equipped to fight in the Alps, in mountain terrain, but our commanders would send us against tanks and motorised infantry in wide open plains, with no proper cover or elevation. For all our leadership hungered for war, they had little idea, it seemed, how to *wage* it. For my part, I discovered that all my dreams of honour were only that. The war tested my mettle, and it broke.

When the King broke with the Fascists and signed the Armistice with the Allies, our erstwhile German companions wasted no time turning on us. I spent the last two years of the war in a Nazi prison camp, but strange as it feels to say, it wasn't actually that bad. They treated us well enough, and having fought together, the abuse was minimal. It was only in the last few months, when our hosts were being pressed by the Russians, and resources became scarce, then we suffered. But this is not what I care to dwell on. It was what happened after we were released that brings me to tell you my story.

You cannot imagine the chaos immediately after the war was lost. Unlike Germany, carved up between East and West, Italy's division was… messier. There was the South, that had surrendered with the King in 1943, and the North, occupied by the Germans for the most part, but some of our forces had still fought alongside them in Mussolini's puppet state. To give you some idea of what I was

returning home to after the war: Il Duce died in April of ‘45 and the Germans surrendered in May, but the official peace treaty between Italy and the Allies was not to be signed until 1947. The country was split, divided and bleeding. There was ‘interim government’ and ‘moves to restore order’, but nobody really knew what was going on. There was no debriefing, no official response to our release; I didn’t even know I was part of a military that still existed. I had to make my own way back to my home near Teramo, walking, hiding and riding in whatever vehicle had a driver who took pity on me.

I don’t know what I expected to find when I finally arrived home. Whatever it was, it wasn’t my old Alpini comrades, uniforms torn and fading, preparing what weapons and equipment they could find for an expedition into the mountains. My home was in the foothills of the Appennino Centrale, and many of the men I served with I had known since childhood. I was glad to see them alive, and they greeted me with smiles and open arms, but there was something tight about their faces that filled me with a faint dread.

I asked what they were doing, and their eyes fell to their guns. Deserters, I was told, in the mountains. Attacking people, and stealing from nearby villages. We were going to find them, and take care of them. I started to protest, sure there must be others better suited to the task, but even before I spoke I knew this wasn’t true. Instead I asked if the deserters knew the war was over; it was likely they no longer needed to hide. Again, a shake of the head, and there was quiet for a few seconds. It was Antonio Cannavaro, one of

my oldest friends, who finally spoke up. The deserters, he said, had gone rotten. Not mad, or desperate. Rotten. *Sono andanti marcio.* [3]

I suppose I could have left them to it. Turned my back on them, and tried to leave my war far behind me. But I don't think that was ever really an option. I told them I was coming, and Antonio nodded his head. There was no joy in the movement. He was a huge bear of a man, was Antonio, but I saw his hands shaking as he checked his weapon yet again.

My father served his King in the Great War. He told me tales afterwards, stories of courage and heroism, of men fighting for the glory of their country. I now know these stories were lies. But when he was drunk, as he was more and more towards the end, he told other stories. Stories that didn't always make sense. Once or twice he had talked to me about the 'wild deserters'. These men, he had said, had fled from their units, but rather than trying to escape *behind* the lines, where they might be caught and shot, they would run into the battlefields, into no man's land, and tunnel under the mud and carnage. They lived down there, so he said, desperate, ragged and barely human. At night you could hear them creeping around the battlefields, stealing what they could, and dragging the bodies of the dead down into their dens. If you were quiet, my father would say with a shudder, you could hear them eating.

I didn't mention these stories to my companions as we started to trek up the slopes of Monte Vettore. They clearly had enough on their minds, eyes narrowed against the glare and mouths pressed tight. We didn't talk about the war. There was no question I could

have asked that did not risk breaking the fragile solidarity of our small band, but as I walked alongside them, I knew that each of them was dwelling on ghosts and stories of their own.

The first sign we saw of our quarry was a thin column of smoke ahead of us, clear against the deep blue sky. It was a mountain cabin, not uncommon in these parts, with a well-built chimney stack gently announcing its warmth. In front of the door sat a woman with coarse, dark hair, built almost as solidly as the chimney, and quietly mending a thick, woollen shirt. As we approached she looked up and we saw, in the middle of her throat, a ragged bullet hole. Her eyes were cloudy and unfocused as she got to her feet and began to walk towards us, blood still trickling from her throat.

I heard a scream, and it was so hoarse and inhuman I assumed for a moment it must have come from this half-dead thing with its ruined throat. But it was Antonio. His face was ashen, and for a second it seemed he was about to drop his weapon and run, but instead he barrelled past me, tackling the woman to the ground. There was an awful snapping sound, but her limbs still moved and flailed weakly as Antonio stood, and began to stomp down with all his weight. The others joined in, shouting or screaming, kicking and beating until the corpse was still. I was the only one left standing at the side, staring down at the beaten and bloody mess of… something. None of us said a word.

The silence lasted for about four seconds. Then there was the gunshot. It echoed around the mountain for far longer than it had

any right to. We scattered immediately, instincts triggering to find cover. Too late for poor Alfredo, a small man whose sister I had once courted long ago. He remained stood exactly where he'd been when the bullet went clean through his skull. It was almost five minutes before he finally collapsed, but we watched for far longer to see if he got up again. He didn't.

That was the turning point. Not the dark-haired spectre of death, but that sudden, unseen death. Uncaring savagery that could be neither foreseen nor avoided, only awaited. From that moment the mountain was no longer the place where we hunted. But neither was it somewhere we were prey. It was simply the place we were going to die.

We continued like this for several days. We saw no other signs of life, or whatever passed for it up there on the mountain. The only indication we saw that we weren't utterly alone would be the periodic sound of a gunshot, as another of our number fell. The stark terror was evident on every face, but none of us even considered turning back. Something in us just *knew* that we were far beyond anything we could control, and if we were leaving this mountain alive, it would not be through our own decision.

By the time we found the cave, it was only myself, Antonio, and a young lad from the village, who should not have joined us in the first place. I never learned his name, but he'd been a drummer in the fanfara[4], or so he said. Judging by how he held his rifle, I believed him. I would have laughed, told him he would have fared better with his drumsticks, but the joke died on my lips.

The smell that came from that cave was far beyond anything I had experienced in the war. The jagged hole into the cliff face oozed bitter, icy cold, and to call it the smell of death would miss the point of it entirely. It was the smell of **our** death. Antonio turned to me without a word, gripped my hand in his, and kissed me once on the forehead. Then he walked to the edge of the cliff and hurled himself over the edge. I didn't look down after him. Truth be told, I envied him his resolve.

I walked into the cave. The drummer boy might have followed after me, or he might have joined Antonio. I never turned around; he was the last thing on my mind. The cave was a long way from natural, forming a smooth but uneven tunnel heading deep into the mountain. It narrowed slightly as I descended, until I was stooped, half-walking, half-crawling along the floor. The smell seemed milder inside, but I don't know if it was truly less, or I had already grown accustomed to it.

The texture of the earth beneath my hands changed so gradually I barely noticed, and the torch I had brought was too weak to show anything more than a few inches in front of me. The first moment I realised what the tunnel had become was when I placed my hand fully over the cold and clammy skin of someone's face.

I pulled my hand back with a cry, and pushed my torch down to focus on what was below me. It was a corpse, as I had thought. Its eyes were closed and its face was serene, but it was dressed in uniform, cut through and black with blood. It was Italian, I thought, but an old design, and not one I really recognised. Shining my torch

around, I saw more of them, half-buried in the walls and ceiling. More dead faces, more uniforms, and not just Italian, either.

I pressed on, trying to find gaps between the bodies where it was still dirt, trying to avoid touching them. But those spaces became smaller and smaller, and the corpses were now piled two or three deep. It wasn't long before the one way forward was clambering over them, climbing along their stiff, unfeeling limbs.

When they all opened their eyes, it was unhurried and deliberate. They were already focused on me, as though they'd been following my progress from behind closed eyelids. They were not cloudy like the woman at the cabin, but sharp and clear, slowly swivelling in their sockets to watch me climb over them. They did not move. I believe, though, at one point they started to sing, but that might just be in the nightmares I have since endured.

When I reached the end of the tunnel, the deserter was waiting. He had his rifle pointed at me, and sat in a tiny hollow with nothing but a small pile of soiled bandages and two dead rats. He was young, and so thin that for the briefest of seconds I felt a deep pity for him. The mud caked on his face had lines carved through it where tears had fallen, but they hadn't been shed for me. He lifted his rifle, and prepared to kill me. I tried to raise my own, knowing with a perverse sense of relief that I was too slow. He would pull his trigger before I would pull mine. It was over.

But as I lifted the barrel to fire, I heard shots, five or six of them, ringing out in rapid succession. In the closeness of the tunnel, they

were deafening. The deserter slumped. He was dead the moment the first shot sounded. Maybe even before that. For all his gaunt frame and emaciated body, he hit the ground with a weight that seemed to shake the mountain. I'd never before witnessed a firing squad, and I never care to again, although of course, I was alone in the tunnel.

I left the deserter's corpse there. Left the cave and the mountain. Left my home and my country. Eventually I came here, and I never want to return. That is my story.

MARTIN

S-S-Statement… done.

[HEAVY BREATHING & TREMBLING AS MARTIN STEADIES HIMSELF]

I don't like recording these. There. I-I said it. I'm sorry whoever's listening to this, I know it's unprofessional, but they f… I don't like it. I guess we're past professionalism now. Probably. I don't even know why I'm still doing them, since John's back now. Well, 'back' is a strong term.

[Sigh] I guess just nobody told me to stop? Melanie's been asking about cases related to wars, so I thought… I mean, it's not even like there's any follow-up I can do on an unofficial Italian military operation from a period in Italian history where there's basically no records.

[Sigh] John came by. He asked Melanie to see what she could hunt down about the owners of an old depot up in Newcastle, and asked me to get him a couple of books on taxidermy from the library. Then he left. Again. I mean, I'm glad he's back, and I guess he seems to trust us a bit more, now, but… And – and I'm glad we can help, of course I am. It's just what he's doing seems really dangerous. And I get that he's worried about us. I mean, we worry about him as well.

I worry.

And we should just –

BASIRA

Could you pass me that pen?

[NERVOUS, SURPRISED SPLUTTERING]

MARTIN

Oh, er… Hi Basira…

Um, how long have you been there?

BASIRA

Erm, I don't know. Couple of hours? Why?

MARTIN

Y-you didn't say anything.

BASIRA

Yeah, I was reading.

[MARTIN CLEARS HIS THROAT]

Did you need me?

MARTIN

No… erm, I just… er, feel a bit… self-conscious?

BASIRA

About what?

MARTIN

Well, I was just, doing a statement and notes and…

BASIRA

Ah. Was it… *good?*

MARTIN

You weren't listening?

BASIRA

No, I was reading.

MARTIN

I just…

BASIRA

Erm, do you want me to find somewhere else to read? Somewhere more… I dunno, obvious?

MARTIN

No, sorry, you just surprised me, is all.

BASIRA

Sorry.

MARTIN

It's okay.

What are you reading?

BASIRA

Introduction to Alchemy. It's, um, really interesting, actually – you know a lot of the symbols people use come from astrology and alchemy. Like the symbol everyone thinks is the female symbol is actually the old astrological sign for Venus, which means it also means copper in alchemy. Which is kind of… What?

MARTIN

Nothing… *[nervous laugh]* you just… You've been reading a different book every time I've seen you for the last week.

BASIRA

Well, it's my job now.

MARTIN

Kinda thought your job was to be a hostage.

BASIRA

I mean, I guess, but… what? You want me to just sit, and mope around? There's a huge library up there…. and this stuff is kind of fascinating.

MARTIN

Shouldn't you be, I don't know, trying to escape?

BASIRA

Sure. How's that gone for you?

MARTIN

What?

BASIRA

The way Tim tells it, we're all in the same boat here. So, how's *your* escape plan coming?

[NOISES OF CONFUSED EXASPERATION]

MARTIN

How… Doesn't it bother you?!

BASIRA

Of course it bothers me, but so do a lot of things I can't change. So you make the best of things.

And, hey, you never know, maybe there's something in these books that can help us.

MARTIN

That's… huh, that's not a bad point, actually.

BASIRA

…

So, er… Do you want me to move?

MARTIN

No, no, I'm just about done. You keep reading.

[PAPER SHUFFLING]

Not much else for us to do.

[CLICK]

1. “The Leader”, title for Benito Mussolini as head of the Italian Fascists. ↩

2. ‘Chief Marshal’, non-commissioned officer rank, roughly equivalent to Sergeant Major in the UK / US Army. ↩

3. Literally: “They are going rotten.” ↩

4. A military brass band. ↩

MAG096 – Return to Sender

Statement #9961505

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Alfred Breekon, regarding a new pair of workers at his delivery company. Original statement given May 15th, 1996. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Three years. It was three years ago when they arrived. It wasn't much, the little delivery company I'd built up, poured my heart and soul into. I don't know why they wanted it. But they did. "Breekon and Sons", I'd always wanted to call it, but I was always unlucky when it came to love, so in the end I called it "Breekon and Hope". Just my own little joke. Backfired on me plenty; everyone always asking if I had to run things by "my partner", and often I was too awkward to correct them. I sometimes used to disappear into the back room, pretend I was making a call to "Hope". It was harmless enough, though, and the company was growing well. We had opened a few new depots, and had a few dozen drivers, making

deliveries anywhere from Aberdeen to Penzance. Life was pretty good, to be honest.

When they turned up at my office, I remember it was their shadows that I saw first. It was early evening, and the sun wasn't shining in through the window, but still their shadows fell across my desk, thick and dark as they loomed over me in the half-light. They wore featureless grey overalls, and even now I'm not sure I could easily describe what they look like, other than to say they seemed *solid*. Somehow heavier than the world around them. They stared down at me, dark eyes sizing me up as I coughed gently, and asked if I could help them.

They traded a few words between them in another language, I think it was Russian, before turning back to look at me. At this point I was pretty sure these guys must be Mafia, probably trying to shake me down, so I waited until it was clear what they wanted from me. But the silence just stretched on and on and on, and eventually I cracked; held out my hand: "Arthur Breekon at your service. Who might you be?"

There was another pause, shorter this time, before the slightly taller of the two – at least, I think one was taller – turned to his companion and opened his mouth. "Breekon at your service. Who might you be?" Instead of the Russian accent I had expected, he spoke in a broad, cartoonish Cockney that I assumed must be a mocking impression of my own voice. I began to stand up, to tell these jokers to get out of my office, but as I did, the shorter one turned to his companion, and in a similar voice replied, "The

name's Hope. What can I do for ya?"

I don't know why this shook me so much, but it stopped me right in my tracks. I just watched as they repeated these two phrases back and forth between themselves, introductions made over and over again. Finally they stopped, and turned back to me. I had no idea what was going to happen or what I was meant to do, but there was something profoundly unnatural about these two figures, and I had no intention of pushing too far and finding out what it was.

It was a sunny day in June, and the window was open to a bright field behind the building. I didn't notice the butterfly until it had landed on the one who kept calling himself 'Hope'. With a slow, languid motion he picked it up. He looked at it for a couple of seconds, then looked at me. Then he ate the butterfly. Not slowly, or particularly fast. He just placed it carefully in his mouth and began to chew.

As his partner did this, the one who seemed to have taken *my* name held out his hand to me. "Keys," he said, this time the word still lightly accented with Russian. I gave them to him. I took the keys to the oldest of the vans, and just handed them over. Anything to get them out of my office. I'm not a small man, you understand, and I'm not used to feeling intimidated. I got into plenty of scrapes when I was young, and there was a small part of me screaming to teach these disrespectful punks a lesson. But when this other Breekon took the key from me, what I felt beneath the skin of his hand convinced me I had made the right choice. Then they turned and left.

I wish I could say that was the last I saw of them, that they stole one of my vans and drove away, never to return. But they did return. And even worse, they started to make deliveries.

They were innocuous at first; the right things delivered to the right people on time. Then it became the right things delivered to the wrong people. Then the wrong things being delivered. Then the *very* wrong things. Strange folk began coming around asking for Breekon and Hope, and when I told them who I was, they just shook their heads, and I knew who they were after, They often brought crates or boxes with them and, once, a sack full of hair. I never opened any of these, or looked too closely when they came around. There was something in me that wanted to believe if I was smart, and kept my head down, maybe I could somehow get through it. I couldn't accept that something like this could just turn up, and casually destroy me without cause.

If there was a reason they've picked me, I have never found out. I have asked them, but unsurprisingly got no answers. There must be other delivery companies, surely, and it was the deliveries they seem to focus on. They're out most of the day and night, usually, allowing me some rest away from their horrid blank faces. But they always come back. When not on delivery, they stand in the break room, facing the wall. Sometimes they laugh, suddenly and abruptly, as though they've both simultaneously thought of a hilarious joke. It sounds like the laugh track in an old sitcom, and cuts off almost immediately. When I get fitful sleep in the small fold-out cot I keep in my office, I can sense them standing there,

looking at me. I don't go home anymore. I'm afraid of what might happen if they followed me outside of a professional environment. My other drivers have been disappearing.

For all that, they do *seem* to have friends, or at the very least, people who come to see them regularly. Most I don't remember, the features difficult to put together from memory, but I know that more than once I've seen the pair of them talking to a figure at the other end of the depot. They always make sure these meetings are in shadow, and I can never get close enough to see exactly who they're talking to, but I think they're dressed like a circus ringmaster.

And so it's been going for the last couple of years. I think I might even be paying them, though it's hard to tell. The account book, as well as the shipping logs and manifests, keeps filling up with entries I don't remember, although it is definitely my handwriting.

I am not sure how long this might continue for. Maybe years. Maybe forever. Whatever fight was in me at the beginning is gone. Occasionally, when they first began to take over, I would start to march up to them, my mind whirring, filled with demands and threats and ultimatums. Then they'd look at me with those blank, impassive eyes, and I'd feel all my resolve simply melt away. Now it's just a memory. A daydream. I've forgotten the taste of determination. It won't last forever, though, because I think they've decided they're done with me.

I came into work yesterday to find a box sat on my desk. The

address and label had been completely scribbled over in black marker pen, and it was impossible to tell from what was left where it had originally been sent to. It didn't matter, though, because on top of it, written in my handwriting with a vicious precision I've always lacked, were the words: "Return to Sender". They'd put it there for me. They'd never delivered to me before. The package was still, but every part of me recoiled from it. I slowly walked forward and touched it, but I did not pull away the tape. The day was warm but the box was ice cold, and the cardboard was spongy and strangely yielding. It didn't move when I pressed it with my hand, but there was a sound like shifting sand. I don't know what was inside. I don't know what *is* inside. It won't be right. It's not my package. I didn't send it.

I tried to look it up in the logs. I found it easily enough. Everything seemed to be in order, except the item description. That line simply read, "Goodbye". God knows how long I spent staring at it. Nothing about that box was right. The card fitted together at slightly-off angles, and the corners were damp, like it had been left out in the rain. The table seemed to bend slightly under its weight, yet when I tried to move it, it seemed so light I doubted for a second it could have *anything* inside. Even then, I never dared to fully lift it up or pull it towards me. There's a gravity there, though, and I don't know how much longer I can resist its pull.

My brother came to you people about ten years ago. He had been having visions of demons and witches, and came to discuss them with you. He never recovered, but he always told me that there was

little quite as freeing as making a statement for you. So I snuck away. But I need to be back soon. It *has* been freeing, talking to you, but not enough to free me from my fate. I am not the sender, but I am going to open that package. I know I leave Breekon and Hope Deliveries in safe hands. Safe hands where the skin feels wrong.

Statement ends.

ARCHIVIST

I found Mr. Breekon. The real one. It's strange, for all he talks of worrying that what's in the box will get him, all the bite marks appeared to be coming from the inside going out.

What does it mean when death no longer fazes you, even the most grotesque? Perhaps it's a sign I'm adapting to my new situation. Useful, I suppose, but…

I was right about the Newcastle depot. It's still here, and it seems like it's been deserted for a long time. There's a pile of mail at the door almost two feet high, and today it was topped with a crisp brown envelope addressed to me, containing this statement. A gift from Elias, no doubt. He could have sent this to me any time, filled me in on Breekon and Hope, but no. I had to find it myself, just in time for him to show me he knew all about it. Cocky prick.

Still, there's not *actually* as much information here as I'd hoped, either here or in the statement. It shows that Breekon and Hope didn't own the company, I guess. That those aren't their real names.

It does seem to confirm that they have some connection to the Circus, judging by clandestine meetings with someone *apparently* dressed as a ringmaster – as if it's not obvious if you're dressed as a ringmaster! *And* their apparent Russian origins. I say 'origins', perhaps… perhaps it's just the last link in a very long chain. If the Circus is connected as closely to the Stranger and the Unknowing as I believe, I should probably keep an eye out for delivery vans.

The other useful thing I found here was one of the old log books. It lists deliveries quite a ways past the point where the company technically ceased to exist, right up to 2013. I need to go through it in more detail, but probably not here. This place… this place is done with its story. It's just… empty.

I don't like it.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[SOUND OF STRUGGLING AND HANDCUFFS]

SARAH

Who the hell are you people? Let me go!

[HANDCUFFS CLICK TIGHTER]

DAISY

Like I said, you're under arrest.

SARAH

What for?

DAISY

Shut up. I've –

[Exasperated] You're recording again?

ARCHIVIST

What? It's hardly your first crime on tape, and if we're going to question her…

DAISY

Is that what we're doing?

SARAH

You're making a mistake, is what you're doing.

ARCHIVIST

Ohhh…. You thought we were going to, er, y'know, kill her.

DAISY

El-Elias didn't say.

ARCHIVIST

No, he doesn't, uh… He's not big on micromanagement.

SARAH

It's Elias now, then?

ARCHIVIST

[Whispering] What?

DAISY

Get on with it.

ARCHIVIST

Not a fan of taxidermy?

DAISY

Don't like wasting time.

SARAH

Last chance.

ARCHIVIST

I… I really don't want to be interrogating her where those… a-animals can see us.

DAISY

They're dead. They can't see us.

[SARAH SNORTS]

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, it would just be a bad idea.

[Deep breath] What's your name?

SARAH

Sarah Baldwin.

ARCHIVIST

Are you the same Sarah Baldwin that disappeared in Edinburgh in August 2006?

SARAH

Some of her. Skin. A few memories. Not on the *inside.*

DAISY

Hand us that knife, and I can check. Smells rank enough already.

ARCHIVIST

No, not… not yet.

Did you go as part of a filming expedition to the Cambridge Military Hospital?

SARAH

A mistake. Thought I'd have fun with some over-curious idiots, but it turned out I had trespassed. I paid for it.

ARCHIVIST

So, what, now you sell dead animals? What is this place?

SARAH

The Trophy Room. A taxidermist shop in Barnet.

It says above the door. Surprised to meet an Archivist who can't read.

ARCHIVIST

No, I –

[DAISY LAUGHS]

DAISY

Nice.

Why are you here? You and Daniel Rawlings and, I assume the others taken by that… mimic thing.

The anglerfish.

SARAH

It's where we were told to be.

ARCHIVIST

What is it? The thing that stole you?

SARAH

It doesn't have a name.

ARCHIVIST

What did it do to you?

SARAH

Exactly what you think.

…

They always suffer.

DAISY

How do we kill it?

SARAH

[Derisively] You don't.

ARCHIVIST

There are, er… there, there are dozens of deliveries recorded here by Breekon and Hope. What were they delivering? What is the

significance of this place?

SARAH

Nothing, except what people give it. But they give it a lot, make it a place of power for us. Enough to keep certain items here. The couriers brought them, and took them, and moved them where they needed to be.

ARCHIVIST

What items? What was stored here?

SARAH

Books, relics, but nothing since the skin.

ARCHIVIST

The… The skin. The, er… *[burbles]* The ancient taxidermy. The-the one that, erm… Scaplehorn.

The one he saw.

SARAH

I-I don't know who that is.

ARCHIVIST

He was a-a tax inspector. He came here, and Daniel Rawlings, or his replacement, showed him something he claimed to be the oldest piece of taxidermy in the world. Gorilla skin from Carthage.

SARAH

Heh, was this when you sent your ‘Sasha’ to interrogate us?

ARCHIVIST

Don’t you dare talk about –

DAISY

Sims. Sims. Shut up and focus.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Right.

Is the skin important?

SARAH

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

For the Unknowing?

SARAH

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

And where is it now?

SARAH

[Surprised] You have it.

ARCHIVIST

I… W-what?

SARAH

You don’t know?

ARCHIVIST

What do you mean I have it?

SARAH

The **old** woman, the one before you. She stole it. She killed Daniel, and took it.

ARCHIVIST

G-Gertrude? But, why would –

SARAH

You *really* don’t know where it is?

ARCHIVIST

Ah…

SARAH

I see.

[SOUNDS OF A PUNCH LANDING, CLINKING METAL AND RUNNING]

[THREE GUNSHOTS RING OUT]

DAISY

[Wheezing] I hit her. I'm sure I hit her.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, you did. Look.

Sawdust and cloves.

Damn.

DAISY

Come on. Before the Met get here.

ARCHIVIST

Whatever you say.

DAISY

And wipe that grin off your face.

[CLICK]

MAG097 – We All Ignore the Pit

Statement #0090303

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Jackson Ellis, regarding the geographical oddities in the town of Bucoda, Washington. Original statement given 3rd March, 2009. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Last year I moved to the small town of Bucoda, about 15 miles outside of Olympia in the State of Washington. I'd never heard of the town before, and I certainly had no idea about what I would soon start to think of as… 'The Pit'. The choice to move was not entirely mine, as my circumstances had driven me into a very particular situation. I had moved out to Olympia from Pittsburgh to pursue what *appeared* to be a very promising job as a correspondent for a regional newspaper. There weren't a lot of opportunities in my field, so when I was offered the position in Olympia, I had used all my savings to make the move.

I never got the full story on why the paper closed down so quickly. One person told me they'd gone bankrupt due to embezzlement at a high level, another claimed there was a huge libel suit and they'd lost it badly, and a third said the decision had been made by their parent company without warning. Whatever the reason, I turned up to my first day of work to find the office halfway through being disassembled. I hadn't technically started my job yet, so there was no redundancy or severance. I was just… stranded in Olympia with no money and no obvious place to go. It didn't help matters that my new landlord proved entirely unsympathetic to my situation. Since, even if I got a new job immediately, I'd be unable to make the next rent payment on the rather overpriced apartment in the city centre. He told me I was in breach of contract, and was to be evicted. He gave me three days.

So, I ended up in a place where I desperately needed to find somewhere very cheap to live, very quickly. Somewhere I could stay while I looked for another job. My parents were dirt poor themselves, and couldn't help. I mean, I'm sure they'd have taken me back in, but I didn't have the money to travel across half the country, especially not with all my stuff. You never realise how many possessions you have until you find them weighing you down, or how little value most of them have to anyone but you. I sold what I could, but I got less than fifty dollars, and had barely got rid of anything.

So when I got chatting to Tommy in a bar, two days before I was getting kicked out, and he told me he had a spare room he was

looking to rent out on the cheap, I said yes almost before he'd given me any details about it. Thomas Krycek was young, blandly handsome, and not desperately bright. He seemed like a good sort, though. He'd bought a small one-storey home in the town of Bucoda with his partner a few years ago, but she'd split a month or two before, and now he was struggling to keep up the payments on the house. It wasn't much, but it fit what might generously be called my 'budget', and Bucoda was less than an hour's drive from Olympia, so commuting in to any job I might actually get wouldn't be too bad. I shook his hand, and I moved there.

The town was almost exactly what you would expect. A small grid without traffic signs or markings, patches of grass and dirt with small houses irregularly dotted about. What infrastructure there was boasted only volunteers, and I'd be surprised if there was more than five hundred people in total who called it home. The forest pressed in on all sides, like it did everywhere in the Pacific Northwest, I suppose, but it was an effect I was struggling to get used to. As I pulled up to Tommy's house for the first time, it was… strange. I felt like even before I turned off the engine I didn't belong there. Like I'd walked backstage at a theatre: nobody stopped me, but I couldn't shake the impression that I'd gone somewhere I wasn't supposed to be. Even when Tommy came out, and started to unpack the trunk, it seemed to me that he blended into the town in a way I just didn't.

There was no sign this was anything other than in my own head, though. Tommy didn't seem to notice anything off, and as I shifted

my stuff into the tiny bedroom he wordlessly handed me a beer with a big smile. I drank it gladly, and tried my best to relax.

As it turned out my situation wasn't *quite* as dreadful as I thought. I discovered the next day that my work had actually paid me a small amount. It wasn't clear whether it was meant to be salary or severance, and I couldn't get through to anyone who might have been able to explain it, but it was enough to ease the relentless pressure, if only a little bit. I allowed myself a few days to rest and recover from the chaos that the last week had been. I suppose technically I could have moved out of Tommy's place, but he seemed… genuinely happy to have me around, and I reckoned my efforts were better spent looking for a new job than a place to live.

I spent the next few days sleeping, drinking, and gently exploring the tiny town which now counted me among its residents. It was quiet, though by no means deserted; I regularly saw other people walking the streets, though there was no sidewalk to speak of. It may have just been my imagination, but whenever they saw me, it seemed like they *paused* for just a moment, staring at me, before they continued on their way. They seemed friendly enough apart from that, and there never seemed to be any subtext or hidden meaning behind their greetings. Thinking back now, though, I'm not sure I ever saw any children, though maybe I'm reading too much into it.

I found the… pit almost immediately. It wasn't like it was something that could easily be missed, sitting there at the intersection of River Street and 6th, gaping up at the bright blue

sky. It looked like a sinkhole, but almost completely circular, and instead of the sheer drop of most such holes, this one sloped gently down towards a small opening at the centre, maybe ten or fifteen feet below street level. In some ways it seemed more like a crater than a sinkhole, but it was so neat and regular, I didn't think it could be the result of any impact or explosion. It was huge, bigger than the street that should have been there, and the thing that struck me as odd, was that the road continued around it. It seemed to split apart just before the pit, and come together on the other side of it. I mean, I don't know if you can judge the age of a hole just by looking at it, but it didn't seem that old. The road did, though, or at least it definitely hadn't been put down recently. There was no indication it had been laid separately to the rest of the town. The pit was just *there*.

As I stood, staring at the hole in the ground, I heard a car coming up the road behind me. I stepped to the side as it drove past and around the edges of the pit, before continuing on. I glanced briefly inside the driver's side window, but there was no surprise on her face, no irritation at the obstacle. It seemed to have barely registered. I left soon afterwards, weirdly unnerved by its… smooth, circular presence.

I asked Tommy about it the next day. He was reaching into the kitchen to grab me a beer, when I told him I'd stumbled across it when walking around town. I wondered, did he know anything about it? How long had it been there? Was it a sinkhole, or an earthquake, or… or what? It was only after I'd casually tossed out a

whole series of questions that I noticed Tommy had frozen in place, one hand in the fridge and the other on the door. He didn't seem alarmed or scared, just completely still. I was quiet for a few seconds, and then he took the beer out and handed it to me, shutting the little fridge behind him. He gave no indication that he'd heard me. So I asked again, the pit on 6th and River, what was it's deal? He looked at me for a while, like he was trying to puzzle out what I had said from a different language, then shrugged, and mumbled something about old roads not being properly maintained. "No," I said, "the pit. The big hole in the ground." He just shook his head like I was talking nonsense, and headed off to his room. I tried to drink my beer, but it tasted thick and unpleasant on my tongue.

I wanted to forget it, to ignore the dusty crater that waited in the middle of this tiny town, but I couldn't. Something about it rubbed at me, like a speck of dirt in my eye, but the more I tried to reach it, the deeper it went. I checked maps of the area, looking to see if any of them featured the odd landmark, but I found ones that went right up to 2008, and none of them had anything marked at that spot, even though the split in the road had clearly been there far longer than a year.

I tried to talk about it, see if anyone else had any idea about what the pit was or why it was there, but when I asked around Joe's – the only diner in town – everyone reacted just like Tommy.

Mishearing, misunderstanding or just straight-up ignoring me. It wasn't even like they seemed deliberately evasive; all their

reactions seemed genuine, but no-one was able to talk about the pit. I'd just about given up on getting anything sensible out of the people at Joe's that afternoon, when an older man walked over to me. I'd seen him around a bit, though I couldn't have told you who he was or what he did. He was big, though, with a face that looked chiselled out of limestone. I stopped eating, and waited.

The old man stared at me for what must have been a good twenty seconds, and then he spoke. "Nothing for you down there," he said. "You just go and enjoy your sky." There was no mistaking the threat in his voice, as if I wasn't going to have a lot of time left to do so, and I was about to say something when his head suddenly snapped forward, and he spat at my feet. Then he turned and walked away. I looked down, and saw a thick brown lump of mud. Nobody looked over, and I didn't follow him.

I actually tried to take his advice. I had other things to be worried about, and fundamentally there was no reason for me to be so obsessed with a hole in the ground. It wasn't even like I needed to travel that road. I was only regularly travelling to Olympia to apply for jobs, and from Tommy's house the pit was in entirely the other direction. But I started to dream about it. Dream about walking into the pit, the ground turning to thick, sucking mud underneath me. I'd dream about it filling my mouth, my lungs. I couldn't breathe.

There was one, I can't honestly say if it was a dream, but I also can't bring myself to call it a memory. It was sunny, the middle of the day. I could hear the sound of laughter from somewhere in town, soft voices chatting to each other. A peaceful day. I walked as

far as the pit, and for the first time, I crossed the edge and began to climb down into it. It was dry, dusty, and the air felt different from the rest of the town. Slowly, carefully, I walked to the hole in the centre. This bit looked more like a sinkhole, disappearing down into the pitch darkness. It was less than a foot across, and I felt a gentle rush of cool, wet air. I sat there in silence, listening, convinced I could hear something, but there was only silence. I leaned closer, my head directly over the hole, and I heard it. And then I did what it told me to.

I took my hand, and I reached down into the darkness. Down and down, until my whole arm was inside, up to the shoulder. It was damp and cold, with the rough stone sides scraping my skin, but my hand was stretched as far as I could, and it still gripped nothing but empty air. Then the hole began to close, and all at once the spell was broken. I tried to pull my arm out, to get free, but it held me tight. Not quite crushing me, but holding me in place. I screamed and cried for help, looking around for anyone who might be able to hear me, but the only people walking by seemed utterly oblivious to what was happening. Then I felt it, something brushing against my hand from below it in the hole. Teeth. Wet, blunt teeth, which quickly gave way to a rough, slender tongue that wrapped itself around my hand and snaked up my arm, as though tasting me. Then, without warning I felt it snap back into the darkness, taking some of the skin with it, and my arm was abruptly released.

The next thing I remember I was lying in bed. I want to say I had just woken up and it was all a dream, but I was fully dressed, dusty,

and with long, thin scratches that snaked around my arm.

That was when I started desperately looking for a way to leave Bucoda. I'd been there for just over a month by this point, and had managed to find a part-time job over in the nearby town, Chehalis. The pay wasn't great, but it should have been just about enough to move out if I was careful. Tommy was upset, of course, but didn't seem surprised – that month had been a bit tense, and we weren't particularly well-suited to living together anyway. I suppose that's what you get for moving in with strangers you meet in a bar.

It was the night before I left that it happened. 17th June, 2008. I'd got all my things boxed up and ready to go. I had the keys to my new place. All I had to do was get one more good night's sleep. Instead I was woken up about two in the morning by the sound of the front door closing. I called out, but Tommy didn't respond. I searched the house to make sure no-one had broken in, but the place was empty. I was alone. Tommy's business was his own, I decided, and was about to return to bed when I saw a shadow pass by the window. Then another. I quietly moved to the door and pushed it open, looking out into the street to see if I could figure out what was going on.

There aren't a lot of street lights in Bucoda, and at night, when all the houses are dark it can get very eerie indeed. I was close enough to see the figures moving down the road, though. They walked casually, like they were just going for a stroll, but there were a lot of them. Maybe the whole town. Walking out of their houses and trailers, and down the unlit streets. I knew exactly where they were

going, and I just couldn't stop myself following them.

I don't know how the whole town was able to get inside the pit. There must have been hundreds of them, piled high, and encrusted with mud. They did not move, though their eyes shone so brightly in my torch that they must have been alive. None of them made a sound, though I could feel a warmth and shuddering below my feet, as though the earth itself was screaming.

Without warning one of their heads snapped towards me. It was a young woman who had lived the next road over, and whose name I had never learned. She stared at me, eyes suddenly alive with terror, and began to scream. The instant she did, she disappeared, pulled into the ground, cutting the sound off before it had even begun. I turned and ran, back to the house. I wanted to drive away, but I couldn't bear to be outside. So I hid, under my bed the rest of the night, and felt the ground rock gently beneath me.

I don't know if Tommy returned the next day. As soon as it was light outside, I leapt into my car, and began to drive away. I tried to, at least. I didn't want to see the pit again, I really didn't. But I did. It was empty, as before, like the previous night had never happened. But it was bigger. And the road had swelled to encompass it.

There was someone else looking at it, though. An elderly woman, face pinched and thoughtful, stood at the edge looking down. I didn't recognise her, or the car she stood next to. She definitely wasn't from Bucoda. Sat in the car next to her, I could see a young

man who had clearly been crying. I couldn't get over how blue his eyes were. The old woman caught my eye, and looked from me, to the pit, and back again. I thought about saying something when she gestured for me to leave, and I did. I decided that I was no part of whatever was happening, so I drove away, and didn't look back.

That night, the earthquake struck that destroyed Bucoda entirely, so I guess I'll never know what was going on. And honestly? I'm glad.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Why has Elias sent me this statement? It took place the other side of the world, to people who don't seem to have any connection with what's going on. I've suspected for a while there may be some power concerned with caves and enclosed spaces, being buried alive or crushed. So I suppose it's nice to get a statement that goes some way to developing that theory, but… I cannot figure out what it has to do with our current situation. Is it the nameless old man? The old woman? Or whoever was crying in the car? Is he trying to warn me not to ignore my own metaphorical pit, because if so, what is my metaphorical pit?

You know, it's somehow worse, now that I know I *can* ask why he's sending me these statements, but that he still won't… tell me. I did my follow-up. Mr. Ellis is still alive and well, currently living in Tacoma, and unwilling to discuss these events any further. The town of Bucoda itself is… Well, it's… gone. Newspapers reported it

as an earthquake, and tremors were felt as far away as Castle Rock, but despite every article describing Bucoda as having been "destroyed" by the earthquake, there are no pictures or records of the destruction itself. No damage seems to have occurred outside of town limits, and all the roads in the area seem unaffected, despite there being no evidence of rebuilding works taking place after the event. As far as I can tell, there *was* an earthquake, and then Bucoda wasn't there, but aside from these two detail –

[LIGHTBULB POPS AND GOES OUT]

Oh. *[Sigh]* Alright, let's….

[STANDS UP, FLICKS THE LIGHTSWITCH ON/OFF TWICE]

Georgie, where's your fusebo–?

Right. Right. Keep saying it's not meant to trip whenever one bulb goes, but "No, John, I don't want to bother the landlord."

[SIGHS]

Ah.

ORSINOV

[Sing-song] You don't want to do that.

[FOOTSTEPS]

[SHARP INTAKE OF BREATH FROM THE ARCHIVIST]

ORSINOV

I mean, you can if you really want to, but you're not going to like it. Sometimes not being able to see something is actually quite a good thing.

ARCHIVIST

Who are you?

ORSINOV

Well, my father called me Nikola, and then I killed him, so I thought I rather deserved to have his second name too. Which makes me Nikola Orsinov. Pleased to meet you at last.

ARCHIVIST

You, um… You killed Gregor Orsinov?

ORSINOV

Yep! He got really boring, and I'm a monster. I mean, what do you *want* me to do – not pull him apart? I did use all the bits.

ARCHIVIST

I… Y… Y-you don't… *sound* Russian.

ORSINOV

How could I sound anything, silly? I'm plastic.

[TAP, TAP ON THE PLASTIC HEAD]

I don't even have a voicebox. I had to borrow this one.

ARCHIVIST

Uh…

ORSINOV

Don't turn on the light.

ARCHIVIST

A-are… Are you going to kill me?

ORSINOV

[Aghast] No!

[Reconsiders] I mean, yes. But not for a good long while yet. I don't want you to go to waste.

ARCHIVIST

Then, er… then, then what…

Then why are you here?

ORSINOV

After you attacked poor Sarah, I thought it was about time we had a good old chat. Face to no face! Eye to… well.

ARCHIVIST

W… What do you want?

ORSINOV

You remember that old piece of skin you were talking about? We'd like it back. We thought that mean old Gertrude had destroyed it. But then you went looking, and now we think maybe she was just very good at hiding.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, are you asking *me* to find it for you?

ORSINOV

That would be lovely. And a lot nicer for you than our other ideas.

ARCHIVIST

What is so important about some ancient bit of taxidermy?

ORSINOV

[Elated] I want to wear it when I dance the world new.

ARCHIVIST

But… But wh- URK!

[THE ARCHIVIST IS STRUCK DUMB]

ORSINOV

Question time is over, little Archivist. Find the skin for us. You have until… well, until I change my mind.

[THE ARCHIVIST FALLS, BREATHING HEAVILY]

Shhh… Save your energy for the dance.

[FOOTSTEPS OVER LABOURED BREATHING]

[CLICK]

MAG098 – Lights Out

Statement #8640514

[CLICK]

[SHUFFLING PAPERS AS MARTIN PREPARES HIMSELF TO READ A STATEMENT]

[LONG EXHALATION]

[DOOR OPENS]

TIM

Oh.

MARTIN

Oh, er…

TIM

Sorry, didn't know you were here.

MARTIN

No, it's – it's – it's alright. Kind of glad, to be honest.

Need a distraction.

Got another statement to record.

TIM

Still doing those?

MARTIN

Yeah. Yeah.

I did ask Elias if I could stop.

TIM

And he said no for a mysterious reason?

MARTIN

I don't know. I mean, he kind of explained. I think? John's "too inconsistent" at the moment. He needs to make up for the shortfall. Which, I guess means me.

Unless…

TIM

No.

MARTIN

He did suggest I try to get you involved and –

TIM

And I suggest he not be a scary, magic psychopath. Whoops! Too late.

MARTIN

Yeah.

[TIM SIGHS]

TIM

Sorry.

MARTIN

No, I – I get it. Heh. They're not exactly much fun.

TIM

Look, it's not that. I… *[Sighs]*

This place is evil, Martin. And I think doing what It wants, probably makes *us* evil. And It wants those things to be read. I mean, I'm not going to stop you, but at the same time…

MARTIN

I – I get it.

TIM

[Sigh] Look, have you talked to John about them?

MARTIN

[Flustered] Erm… not…. I don't know, he always gets so **weird** about the statements, and I… I guess I… I didn't want to make him jealous?

TIM

Jealous.

MARTIN

I don't know! Sort of? I mean… Look, it didn't come up, alright?

Have you seen him since…?

TIM

[Grunts] Kind of. We tried to talk, but he, he reached for that – Ah, he, he wanted to turn on his recorder. I freaked out a bit, and I said some stuff: if he wanted to talk, **no tapes**, I just, I just **hate** that thing.

You?

MARTIN

Yeah, we talked. Not long, he – Y'know, I think he thinks that the distance keeps us safe, you know? Like, like, if he just makes sure that we're not involved, we're somehow fine.

TIM

He's an idiot. Look, we didn't know what that door was, and it *still* trapped us. Ignorance isn't going to save anyone.

MARTIN

No, I mean, you're right, I guess. He was… Y'know, we know about Sasha now, and… he said he doesn't want to lose anyone else. Like, y'know, it's *his* fault.

TIM

Isn't it?

MARTIN

No! No, it isn't! I mean, you *heard* Elias… We never really stood a chance.

TIM

Yeah.

Maybe. But *Elias* wasn't actually the one who offered me the job down here.

MARTIN

No, I –

Sure.

…

TIM

L-Listen, I, I've gotta go. I've got… stuff to do.

MARTIN

Sure.

[DOOR CLOSES]

[MARTIN SIGHS, GATHERS PAPERS]

[HEAVY PAUSE AS HE NOTICES TAPE RECORDER RUNNING]

Huh.

Yeah, y'know, y'know what? A little privacy **would** be nice sometimes, okay? Not everything's for you! You don't need to listen to everything that we –

Alright, you know what? Y'know what… If you're *that* eager, fine.

Martin Blackwood, Archival Assistant at the Magnus Institute, recording statement number 8640514. Statement of Doctor Algernon Moss, given May 14th 1864.

[CLEARS THROAT]

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

My story, such as it is, should not be long in the telling, though

there is much you could understand of the circumstances surrounding it. I come to you not to wallow in my condition, or pour out my soul like a papist in the confessional, but to request your assistance. I believe that Maxwell Rayner has at his disposal some unholy power that he has used to curse me and cause my blindness. Or, more precisely, to cause me to blind myself, for I shall not deny I did so willingly. For obvious reasons my accusations have had me laughed out of most polite society. Not quite so polite when you're accusing someone of witchcraft, it would seem. I now ask the assistance of your Institute in the hopes that you may be able to furnish some evidence or legal precedent that may assist me in taking action against my assailant, though I will admit my expectations for the latter are limited.

Maxwell Rayner is an oddity. He claims to be an antiquities dealer from Africa, and has, of late, become something of a darling in certain circles of Cambridge, though I have never heard him discuss either antiquities or his supposed homeland in any real detail. His passion appears to be polar expeditions, and it's rare to attend any social gathering with him where the subject does not eventually come up. In particular he seems to share that peculiarly specific mania regarding the fate of John Franklin and his lost expedition. I would assume he was intending to accompany such a party himself, were it not for the fact of his own blindness. Indeed, the spectacle of his milky white eyes staring behind the weathered black skin of his face is an image so striking that, were I to be uncharitable, I might suggest it had something to do with the readiness with which he acquires invitations and calling cards. He is led around by a

young Arabian lad of ten or eleven, though the ease with which he carries himself makes me suspect this assistance is an affectation rather than necessity. Both speak perfect English, with no accent I can recognise, though the boy rarely opens his mouth other than to alert Rayner of nearby goings-on.

The circumstances of our dispute are, by some margin, the least interesting part of my tale. I outbid him at an auction. It was nothing of note, so I assumed, though perhaps I should have considered his particular obsession. It was an oilskin packet of documents, supposedly from the log-books of Franklin's lost ship, the *HMS Terror*. I will admit a small amount of interest in the matter myself, and my inclination turned to resolve when I saw how insistently Rayner was bidding on it, and I prevailed. He approached me afterwards to discuss the matter and, perhaps if his tone had been less sharp, I might have allowed him to observe the documents himself, but as it was I took some issue with his manner of address and curtly denied him. He was almost shaking with rage at this point, and I was momentarily concerned that the situation might descend into violence when, instead, he leaned forward and whispered with an intensity I had never before heard in a human voice: "Pray the Sandman only brings you sleep."

Now, the fact that these words filled me with a stark terror that all but overcame my senses probably needs some explanation. My father was not a kindly man, you see. He came from a stern Christian tradition that would curdle the smiles of the simpering vicars you encounter these days. As a boy, I soon learned that the

key to avoiding his ire was to avoid his attention altogether, and never more so than after I had been put to bed. The nursery, you see, had its door in the middle of the passage between the drawing room and my father's study and, as such, he would pass by it several times a night. When I heard that heavy tread outside the door and the shadow passing over the threshold, I would lie there and pray that I was quiet enough not to disturb his passage. If I was ever foolish enough to leave my candle burning that I might read a few minutes more, I would hear the door open and my father's voice intone, "Lights out." He had been a military man in his youth, had my father, and he prided himself on handing down that discipline to me.

Eventually I was sent off to board at Repton School, up near Manchester. The Headmaster there, one John Heyrick Macaulay, was apparently an old friend of my father's. It was a miserable place: over two centuries old and very much showing it. When I attended there must have been barely fifty boys there, and no cricket pitch, racquet court, or any of the sort of facilities one might have expected, nor even a chapel. The few masters there taught Latin and Greek readily enough, but no French or music or natural science. Were it not for the relative freedom we had to rove around the nearby land and towns, I would have had a solidly miserable time there. Even when we managed to play football, it was between crumbling arches, loomed over by the jagged shadows of broken pillars. For all the life and vitality of the boys there, the place itself was decrepit, and sometimes I feel it resented our presence.

I had one great friend during my time at Repton, a lad named George Denman. I'm sure you recognise the name, given the recent speeches he's been giving on capital punishment. Well, I bet it never comes up in his Parliamentary goings-on that he has the word "Fly 1835" inscribed on his left arm with India ink. "Fly" was the nickname the hound master at Repton gave him, you see, on account of his propensity for running, and he insisted on getting hold of a needle and tattooing it upon himself. This may give you an idea of the impetuous soul that possessed Denman as a youth. He was always going out of bounds or running off after curfew, and if the masters caught him he'd be dragged back to bed. He slept in the bedroom adjoining my own, and whenever I heard the approaching footsteps of whichever master caught him, I would instinctively blow out my candle, the old dread of my father returning in a rush.

One day, Denman pulled me to one side, eyes alive with mischief, and told me that he had returned from his holidays in possession of a "positively ghoulish" book. It was a German tome titled *Die Nachtstüke,* and contained several morbid tales by a man named Hoffman. I spoke little German, but Denman had enough of a grasp for us to puzzle through the stories together. The candles would burn low as, sentence by sentence, we would decode that delightful unease that can be elicited by a properly macabre tale.

The first of the collection was titled *Der Sandmann,* and was what I believe would these days be referred to as a psychological story, dealing with the madness, trauma and hallucinations of the protagonist, including the eponymous Sandman. What stuck with

me, however, was a description given of a particularly horrific interpretation of the Sandman. Far from the comforting friend of children he is so often portrayed as, he was rendered as *quite* the monster.

I remember how the old maid of the story describes him quite keenly, as well as I remember my own dread at the passage Denman translated:

> "He comes to children who don't go to bed, and throws his sand all into their eyes, and they start to bleed. He takes those fallen eyes up in his bag, and carries them up into the crescent moon, to his nest, where his own children feast upon them. They have crooked beaks like owls, all the better to pick the eyes of naughty human children."

Dear lord, just remembering it, even now, blind as I am, it still makes me shake. You can imagine the effect it had on me as a lad. Denman read us through the rest of the stories, but I could barely pay attention, my mind fixated on that figure with its razor-sharp sand and long, hooked beak. Now, when I heard my masters walk past my room at night, I had no doubt as to the terrible shape they had taken. I had the most awful nightmares of the Sandman, stood in my doorway, motionless, intoning in the voice of my father: "Lights out".

I had never told anyone of this childhood terror, not even my wife. So, you may imagine the shock and confusion when I heard the

words spoken by Maxwell Rayner. He actually looked almost surprised at my expression when I pulled back from him, clearly sensing he had struck a nerve. Perhaps he didn't know, and I was simply a victim of the most grotesque coincidence. Whatever the situation, I mumbled my excuses and fled. I swear I could still feel those unseeing eyes follow me as I left the room, a grin of victory playing upon his lips.

Perhaps you can guess what happened next. I don't know how vivid or nightmarish the other accounts you collect here might be. Certainly nobody else believes me when I speak of it. But… the Sandman came for me that very night.

He was nothing like the story. He was tall, yes, and thin, but the edges of him were impossible to see against the darkness he was a part of. He had no beak, but coarse black sand trickled from his open mouth and hit the floor with a steady hiss. His legs were long, but he crossed the room slowly, every one of his joints moving and twisting as he took step after torturous step. There was no sound at all. I looked to my wife, but she was locked in a peaceful sleep.

A thin beam of moonlight was clearly marked upon the floor, where a gap in the curtains let it shine through. As the long dark foot touched it, I watched that moonlight curdle like rancid milk. Wherever the Sandman touched, the world dissolved into a choking darkness. First my door. Then creeping along the distance of our bedroom. Then the bed itself. Then my Agatha. Until all that was left was me, the darkness, and the dreadful thing that brought it.

I do not know how I had come to the conviction that I was in the Sandman's sack. The idea simply arrived in my head fully formed. I had been taken, and would remain here, trapped forever in this lightless place, without even the faintest hint to taunt me. The darkness pressed in, and seemed to fill my mouth, my nose. But it did not touch my eyes. And then I made a choice. I still knew where the Sandman was, though I couldn't tell you how, and I decided that sightlessness was preferable to darkness. If you had asked me before, I would have told you that there was no difference, but I know better now. There is far more to the darkness than simply being unable to see.

I reached out to where I knew the thing's pouch would be, and seized a handful of sand. It was already slick with my blood as I lifted it and cast it into my face. I do not suppose I need to dwell upon the pain, but please know that I would sooner die than endure it again.

It worked, though. Inasmuch as I have remained solidly within this world. In some ways I left my sight behind in that awful place, but I am well rid of it, if it kept the rest of me here. I only wish the last thing I saw, the final vision burned into my mind, had been anything other than that awful, shifting face.

So, there is my story. I'm sure you'll agree that Maxwell Rayner is the clear architect of my misfortune. Now, how do you suppose I revenge myself upon him?

MARTIN

[Panting] End of statement.

[Deep breath] I, um, I think I might need to sit down. Oh. Yeah, I am. Right. I don't, uh, I'm not really sure if these are actually getting easier or harder. I mean I don't feel –

Y-You know what, that's not important. *[Sigh]* I wish John kept better organised notes because I **know** he's mentioned someone called Maxwell Rayner, but I cannot find much in the way of any info –

[DOOR OPENS]

MELANIE

Uh, Martin, have you seen Elias?

MARTIN

Oh, uh… No, but Tuesday lunch he normally meets with the Library staff, I think. He'll… He'll probably be back in his office in an hour or so?

MELANIE

Ah, thanks.

Er… Are you alright?

MARTIN

Hm? Oh, I, yeah, I've… ah. Yeah, I'm fine.

MELANIE

You just look really pale.

MARTIN

I… *[Sigh]* I was just recording one of the statements, and they are…

MELANIE

Ah, right! Yes.

They, um… they're a lot, aren't they?

MARTIN

Sorry?

MELANIE

I mean they… they really take it out of you. I must have slept, er, twenty hours after I did one.

MARTIN

Hang on. **You** recorded a statement?

MELANIE

Yes. It was about a bed, funnily enough.

MARTIN

I… I don't suppose you'd mind doing some more?

Elias wants to make up the shortfall while John's away and what with Tim…

MELANIE

Sure, no problem. Al-Although I was just going to have a talk with Elias, so, uh, maybe I can convince him to cut you some slack.

MARTIN

I wouldn't hold my breath.

MELANIE

Right. Fair. Listen, you really look like you could use a drink. Um, me and Basira were just about to pop out. So… do you want to join us?

MARTIN

It's like one in the afternoon.

MELANIE

Are you afraid of getting fired?

MARTIN

…

Huh. I'll get my coat.

MELANIE

Great.

Just, um, gimme, gimme an hour or so. I, I just have a few things to take care of… first.

[DOOR OPENS]

MARTIN

Huh.

[DEEP SIGH]

Oh, um, er, end recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

MELANIE

Knock, knock.

ELIAS

Ah, Melanie. Can I help you?

MELANIE

Oh, not really. I, I just went out for some coffees, and, and thought I'd get you one.

ELIAS

How very thoughtful.

MELANIE

I don't know how you take it, but John likes his black, so… I, I thought that was a fair assumption.

ELIAS

It was. However, I think I'd rather you drink it.

MELANIE

Oh… er, what?

ELIAS

The coffee you brought me.

[SLIDES COFFEE ACROSS DESK]

Drink it.

MELANIE

N… N… No. Y-You're okay. I've, I've got my own actually. It's a… a decaf one… *[Nervously chuckles]*

ELIAS

I assume you don't believe me, then? That murdering me would also kill you?

MELANIE

I-I-I don't know what you're…

ELIAS

Coffee is not as good for disguising tastes as you might think. And it's even worse at disguising texture. Dissolved pills always leave such a, um, *chalky* residue.

MELANIE

Look, Elias, I never –

ELIAS

I assume this is your first time attempting to poison someone? Do you actually know how many painkillers it takes to kill someone, or were you just hoping I'd take enough to get sick, and you could finish the job… manually?

[A CLOCK TICKS]

MELANIE

[Deep breath] Why…? Why bother asking then? Why bother if you *know* everything?

ELIAS

[Chuckles slightly] I don't know *everything,* Melanie. Do you know how exhausting that would be?

I'll tell you one thing I *don't* know, and that's how to convince **you** that I'm trying to help. Honestly, you're one of the lucky ones. But not if we're all dead thanks to an… overzealous attempt at independence.

MELANIE

I don't need you to –

ELIAS

Let's have no more clumsy assassination attempts, alright? And we'll say no more about it. Consider this your first warning. Next time I shall have to escalate matters, and that won't be a pleasant process for anybody.

…

Understood?

…

Melanie?

MELANIE

…

Yes.

ELIAS

Good.

MELANIE

…

Did…? Did you turn that on?

ELIAS

Hmm? Oh. You get used to it.

[CLICK]

MAG099 – Dust to Dust

Statement #9522002

[CLICK]

GERTRUDE

Case 9522002 – Robert E. Geiger. Incident occurred in Boise City, Oklahoma, April 1935. Victim's name given as Stefan Brotchen. Statement given 20th of February 1952. Committed to tape 2nd of September, 2007. Gertrude Robinson recording.

GERTRUDE (STATEMENT)

I read somewhere once I was the first man to use the term "Dust Bowl". Now, that's not so. Maybe the first the boys in the New York office had heard, but down in Oklahoma it wasn't too unusual a turn of phrase. Wide, flat, open spaces… You could see a storm coming for miles, coming straight at you all across the horizon, looking near as anything like the end of the world.

Those were bad days. Worse than anyone knows. Did my best to spread the word, filed my copy with the AP, but there was plenty I never did find the words for. There were things in the dust that I never told to a soul. It's why I decided to step in on you folks. I still wish there was a place like this back home, but the way things are going they'd be up in front of Congress, likely as not, so maybe it's

for the best.

You know much about dust pneumonia? Don't know why you would do, really. There isn't much of it about these days. Wasn't back then, either, at least before the storms came. Then there was plenty. The name makes it sound more complicated than it is. You see, 'dust pneumonia' is just a medical way of saying your lungs are full of mud. Too much goes in, you see, and it clogs up all the bits of your chest that should clear them out. There's fever, difficulty breathing, infection… The dust mixes with the moisture of your insides, and soon enough you're drowning, your lungs packed solid with mud and mucus.

Awful thing to happen to anybody, but that's what the dust storms were. Great chunks of earth torn up and hurled across the open plains, desperate to find some poor unsheltered throat and climb inside. They buried you alive, without even giving you the courtesy of getting you below the ground. And I saw so many choking farmers, their dirt-streaked faces seemed to blend together. Watching as their livelihoods evaporated with the rain. As their farms, their homes, their lives collapsed into dirt. It was all a long sepia blur: weather-beaten faces caked in that same patina of misery and grit. All except for Stefan.

Stefan Brotchen was, to all appearances, much the same as any other Okie farmer: strongly built, with a mess of short, curly, blond hair and a round, smiling face. But his eyes were different. There was… *something* there. I-I was never quite sure what, but they had a depth, a quiet intensity to them that struck me the first time I saw

him. I'd been gathering comments for an AP article on the latest dust storms to hit the area. There'd been a lot of interest nationally after one dust storm made it all the way to Washington, and my editor was keen to get some comment from the people worst hit. So, naturally, I ended up in Boise City.

There was always something odd about that town. Something about it at odds with the land it sat on. Challenged the wide stretches of nothing. I guess that's not a surprise, looking back. I did some research on the place afterwards, you see. Did you know that Boise City was founded by fraud? I mean literal, send-you-to-prison fraud. Yeah, back in 1908, three men decided to start selling the deeds to land they didn't own. They printed up hundreds of brochures: "Come to scenic Boise City! Tree-lined boulevards, all the amenities, even a railroad station, all ready and waiting for brave souls to head out there and settle." And people bought it. Almost three thousand of them. Of course, when they finally arrived to this fabled town, there was absolutely nothing there at all. Just empty, waiting earth. They didn't even own the plots of land they'd been sold. But they stayed, and they built a town. Not a great town, by any stretch. Not even a good town, truth be told, but there it was, in defiance of all good sense.

One of the men who settled in the newly formed Boise City was Stefan Brotchen's father. He was long-dead by the time we met his son. My photographer, a small man named Harry Eisenhard, had been told about the Brotchen farm when asking about places around the area hit bad by the storms. Stefan's fields had nothing

left but dry earth, they told us. Farmhouse stripped almost bare by the harsh winds, his livestock dead and already half-buried, his family gone. Never found out more than that. Just… gone.

When we pulled up that Sunday, the place was everything we'd been told and more. We'd see the top of wheels and farm equipment poking up through the ground, until we realised it wasn't the ground, just a good three feet of newly fallen dirt half-burying the ploughs and wagon. I saw what must once have been a cow, covered from the neck up in coarse and clinging dust. Harry and I had wrapped our handkerchiefs over our faces, as the men back in town had told us, but the air was already thick, and I could hear Harry coughing beside me. I'd seen a few victims of the dust pneumonia by this point, and the sound of his breathing made me press the cloth close to my face, and offer up a silent prayer.

Stefan did not wear a cloth across his face when he came out to meet us, and I could see the fine particles collecting in his hair, in the corners of his eyes. He smiled warmly, and waved us over. I've tried in the years since to remember if there was anything behind that smile, anything dark or secret that I might have overlooked; there was nothing. The soft, friendly voice was, as far as I can tell, genuine, and as Stefan Brotchen sat there in his small, dusty kitchen, telling us his misfortunes, there was no clue in his face as to what must have been going on inside him.

His story was not unusual, and I'm sure that if you hunted down a copy of the *Lubbock Evening Journal* from that week there'd be most of it in there. Crops dying, soil parched and a farm on the brink of

ruin, all ruled over by that desperate, empty hope of rain. He never mentioned his family, and I never thought to ask, though the house clearly was far too big for Stefan to live there alone. He offered us a drink at one point, just water, but I couldn't bring myself to accept. I just had this image playing through my mind over and over again. He stands up, walks over, pulls out a bottle of thick, flowing mud, opens it, and pours it down his throat with a smile on his face. Just my imagination, I told myself. Just letting the dust get to me.

It only took an hour or two before I decided I had enough material for the story, and I stood up, and thanked him for his time. Harry did the same, and I shook Stefan by the hand. As I touched his skin, I almost pulled my hand away, it was so hot. It was a dry, feverish heat and I looked at his face and saw for the first time the fierce, flushed redness, the forehead slick with sweat. His chest started to convulse, and he doubled over, spluttering out a clod of pulpy, brown sludge onto the wooden floor. I started to ask if he was okay, but Harry tugged on my arm, gesturing outside with an almost wild urgency. It all seemed to be happening so fast I could barely register what was going on. At least, until I got outside and looked west.

The vast, roling black clouds stretched before us, as far as we could see. It was coming for us with such a speed that there was a part of me that immediately knew, despite all logic, that it was trying to kill **me**, and me alone. It was the worst dust storm I had ever seen, and it promised to blot out everything. I ran back inside to warn Stefan, and ask if he had anywhere we could wait it out, but I found him lying on the ground. He was face down, a thin trickle of dirt

oozing slowly from his mouth and nose. I called to Harry, told him Stefan needed help, but he could barely hear me over the wind, which was now so fierce that it seemed to drown everything else out. When I finally made him understand, he seemed none too keen to drive through the storm, and warned me the engine would clog before we got half way back to Boise City. I said we had no choice but to try. If we didn't, then Stefan was already dead.

We covered his face with a cloth, and carried him out and into our small car, laying him into the back as gently as we could. The wind was so sharp it felt like it was trying to strip the flesh from my skull; I had to hold my hand in front of my eyes to keep out the dirt that was whipping around at forty miles an hour. Even with my handkerchief covering my mouth, I could feel the dust creeping in, forming a damp, cloying paste between my teeth. And the storm hadn't even hit yet.

I climbed into the driver's seat, while Harry scuttled round to the passenger side, and with Stefan laid across the back we turned and began the drive back towards town, trying to convince ourselves we had any hope of outrunning the storm.

We did not.

It bore down on us like the judgement from Heaven, and in less than a moment the sun was gone and the sky was black. I tried to keep driving, but I could hear the engine choking, sputtering, and finally coming to an end.

It's hard to describe just how dark it is in the middle of a dust storm. It's not just the lack of sun but that no light can penetrate more than a few feet, before the swirling opaque cloud kills it dead. It's loud, with the wind and the sound of those dry specks of earth blasting against the car, but it's the sort of loud that, after a while, starts to feel a lot like silence. We did our best to plug up any gaps in the windows or the frame, and keep as much of the dust outside as we could, and then we sat there, feeling for all the world like we were the last people left alive, entombed within our metal coffin.

I tried to say something to Harry, to reassure him, but opening my mouth just invited more dust, and I was already coughing more than enough to panic. So we just sat there, in what felt like silence for over an hour, trying not to think about the storm, or the poor Oklahoma farmer dying on our back seat. We just waited.

At some point Stefan must have finally died. I know this because when he started talking to us again, there was no way he could have made those noises unless his lungs and throat were fully packed with sediment. The words were soft, insistent and spasmed out of his dirt-clogged body like an earthquake. I don't remember what he said, not really. It only comes back to me in those quicksand dreams, where I feel the earth swallowing me forever. He was making promises, I think. Promising us that when the sky fell and became an eternity of mud, he would carve out a place for us in the heart of the forever buried. He would show us… the love of 'Choke'.

I still couldn't see anything, but I felt his hand on my face, hot and

dry and rough, and I tried to scream, but it just let in more dust. Harry did scream, though, and I could hear a struggle going on beside me, grunts and the sounds of flesh striking soil, then the sound of a car door opening, and the sudden rush of wind and grit. And then it closed abruptly, and I once again sat in the unmoving quiet of the car. Except this time, I was alone.

I never saw Harry Eisenhard again. When the storm finally passed, I spent hours searching for him, but he was gone. I did find the body of Stefan, though, about twenty yards away, so encrusted with dirt he barely looked human anymore. Black Sunday, they called that storm, and Harry was a long way from its only casualty. He got lost in the shuffle, officially mourned by the staff of the Associated Press, and then never discussed again. I wish I could say more about him, but honestly, I hadn't worked with the man very much. All I know is that he was taken by Stefan Brotchen, and that it happened after Brotchen was dead. When all that made him human was suffocated, and the only thing left to move and speak inside him was that terrible killing dust.

GERTRUDE

[Sighs] Hmm. Final comments.

Based on the history of Boise City and its deceptive roots, I would perhaps have expected some aspect of the Spiral to be at work here, but its unique position at the centre of the Dust Bowl does seem heavily to indicate another power overtly at work. I have had my suspicions about where to be focusing my efforts, and the nature of

the pseudo-prophecies given by the dust inside Stefan Brotchen seems to confirm them. To that end, I've been examining fault lines and seismic data for –

[KNOCKING ON DOOR]

[GERTRUDE GROANS]

[Adopts a somewhat frailer voice] Hello?

[DOOR OPENS]

MICHAEL

Ah, Miss Robinson, I, um, I found Mr. Vargas' statement that you asked for. Well, uh, I found the translation. I, I already had the original but, y'know, I, I, I didn't think you'd want it in Spanish. *[Nervous chuckles]* U-u-unless you speak Spanish?

GERTRUDE

[Somewhat sharply] I do not. And thank you Michael.

MICHAEL

Sure. Um, well, was, was there anything else you needed?

GERTRUDE

Um… No, no. Not at the moment.

Thank you.

MICHAEL

Right, well, if you need me, uh, they're installing that climate-controlled storage… that thing o-o-over the weekend, so I'm, I'm, y'know, I'm just getting all that together.

GERTRUDE

Yes! Yes, I remember.

MICHAEL

Right.

Well, call me if you need anything.

GERTRUDE

Thank you, Michael, I will.

[DOOR CLOSES]

[Normal voiced] Right. These additional researches have further cemented my belief that North America is going to be the focal point for the Buried. Now it's just a matter of narrowing down the specifics of geography, and that may just come down to monitoring the right movement of supplies and people. I'm still not completely sold on the US for the Hunt, but that's unlikely to be quite as urgent.

For the Buried, however, I do have what I believe might be quite an effective plan forming. Assuming, of course, that my suspicions about Jan Kilbride are correct, and that's something that should be easy enough to determine once he's back on Earth. Considering what's probably happened to him up there already, I feel almost… bad, but there's ten years yet before I can afford a conscience.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

I, um… I… Right. Right, I –

My head is… That was Michael. It – it was… It was Michael. H-how… **How** was it Michael? He – It… **It** never…

Gertrude knew Michael. He was one of her assistants, but, but, but that doesn't make any sense. The *thing* that calls itself Michael, it – it – it doesn't seem like it was **ever** human. So what happened to the real Michael? Did –

I mean that's not really a question, is it? He's dead, and it's probably because of Gertrude. I still can't figure out whose side she was actually on. Or even if she was playing the same game.

Doesn't matter. Everyone who came close to her… seems like it… it

went badly. Her assistants, Gerard, Leitner, Elias, though I don't think Gertrude had anything to do with his going rotten. But Michael… Did it take that form just to mock me? Knowing that at – at some point I'd look deeper into Gertrude? WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU?

…

No. No, never when you call.

Just one door. So many of these stories, these, these people touched by… Once you're on the path to becoming a monst- an *avatar,* it looks like it gets more and more unhealthy to be around you. *[Heavy sigh]* I think… I think I need to lea–

[DOOR OPENS]

GEORGIE

Uh, John, did you call me? I was in the studio, but I thought I heard you shouting.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, uh, no it's a false alarm.

GEORGIE

Okay, uh, sure. You alright?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, I… Look, look, I've been thinking –

GEORGIE

Are you sure? You look a bit –

ARCHIVIST

No, I'm fine!

GEORGIE

No, really, you're really sweating.

ARCHIVIST

Look, G-Georgie, I need to move out.

GEORGIE

Umm… yeah. I thought you were looking for a place. Y'know, now, now you've got a salary again.

ARCHIVIST

No, I, I mean, **now**.

GEORGIE

What, now now? It's like five in the afternoon.

ARCHIVIST

T-Tomorrow, then. I… I – I just… I just don't like staying here.

GEORGIE

Well thanks.

ARCHIVIST

You know that's not what I mean. I feel like I'm putting you in danger.

GEORGIE

Well, yeah. You *are.* A horrible mannequin thing turned up.

Had to change all my lightbulbs.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. This, this is my point!

GEORGIE

I said I'm fine with it. At least until you're properly back on your feet. You're not doing well. You keep apologising and saying you're changing, but it's all just the same. If you leave, I think it's just going to get worse, and I don't want that.

ARCHIVIST

I do appreci – I mean, I don't… Georgie, you literally can't feel fear! Are you sure that that's not –

GEORGIE

Don't! Okay. I'm well aware of my situation. It does not make me an idiot. And it doesn't mean I got a death wish, either.

ARCHIVIST

Is it… Why are you so insistent on keeping me around?

GEORGIE

Because you're trying to cut yourself off, and that's… that's really bad. Look, when's the last time you spoke to someone who wasn't me?

ARCHIVIST

That's… I… I – I – talked to Martin a… a, a few weeks ago…

GEORGIE

Did you talk to him? Or did *he* talk to *you,* while you tried to find a way to escape?

ARCHIVIST

I…

GEORGIE

Look, you're worried. I get it. But if you really think you're turning into something… *inhuman,* you need people around you. You need anchors.

ARCHIVIST

All my “anchors” are just as deep in this as me.

GEORGIE

Well, you still need them.

ARCHIVIST

[Sigh] Maybe you’re right. I’ll talk to the others. Check in properly, see if I can help with the, uh, with Elias’ new management style. But I won’t stay here. If something happened to you, or, or, god-forbid, the Admiral, because **I** was here –

GEORGIE

Alright, fine. I mean, you’re a grown-ass man, you want to leave, find a hotel, I can’t stop you. Just… keep in touch, alright? Y’know, don’t be a ‘stranger’.

ARCHIVIST

Georgie.

GEORGIE

Oh come on, that was classic Barker.

ARCHIVIST

I’m just not in the mood.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[MUFFLED SOUNDS OF THE STREET]

BREEKON

‘scuse us.

HOPE

Are you Jonathan Sims?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, wh–? Oh, sh–

[THE ARCHIVIST EXCLAIMS & COUGHS AS THE WIND IS KNOCKED OUT OF HIM]

BREEKON

Miss Orsinov wants to see you.

HOPE

She says she changed her mind.

ARCHIVIST

No, I – I –

[VAN DOOR SLIDES OPENS, THE ARCHIVIST IS BUNDLED IN BREATHING HEAVILY]

[DOOR SLIDES SHUT AND THE ENGINE STARTS]

ARCHIVIST

Oh god.

[CLICK]

MAG100 – I Guess You Had To Be There

Statement #VARIOUS

[CLICK]

MARTIN

Sorry again that the Archivist isn't actually in today, um… but I should be… absolutely fine to take your statement if it, um, if that's okay with you?

LYNNE

Er… yeah.

MARTIN

O-kay.

Um. Are you, are you comfortable?

LYNNE

Yeah.

MARTIN

Right. Right.

[THROAT CLEARING]

Statement of Lynne Hammond, er, recorded 2nd of May 2017, regarding…

Uh, what, what's this one about?

LYNNE

I saw a ghost.

MARTIN

O-kay.. Regarding a… a ghost. Statement begins.

LYNNE

…

Sorry. What happens now?

MARTIN

Oh, er… *[nervous chuckle]* Well, I mean, you, you tell us what happened.

LYNNE

Well, yeah, I did. I saw **a ghost**.

MARTIN

Er, no, I mean, I mean, you, sort of, tell the story of –

LYNNE

Yeah. The story is: I saw a ghost.

MARTIN

Okay. But what, what was it like? How did it make you, er, feel?

LYNNE

Erm… it was… scary and it made me feel… scared.

I'm sorry. Am I doing this wrong?

MARTIN

Ah… no, no, no, it's okay. Erm… Let's, let's try this again. Try this again…

When did you first see this ghost?

LYNNE

Oh… god. Erm… about a year ago.

MARTIN

Anything more specific than that?

LYNNE

Er, I mean it's been a while. I can't really remember –

MARTIN

Er… okay, okay. Er, where? Where, where did you see the ghost?

LYNNE

Uh, my old flat.

MARTIN

Okay, okay, great. Which … where's that?

LYNNE

Clapton.

MARTIN

Clapton. Clapton, okay. And, erm, what, what were you doing when you saw the, when you saw the ghost?

LYNNE

Well, I was asleep.

MARTIN

…

You –

LYNNE

Well, I mean –

MARTIN

…saw a ghost when you were asleep?

LYNNE

No, no, obviously I woke up.

MARTIN

Right, right.

LYNNE

And… ghost.

MARTIN

Right. Erm…

LYNNE

Well, first it was, like… a burning smell.

MARTIN

Oh! Okay, okay. So… Did this happen a lot?

LYNNE

Yeah, yeah. A few nights.

MARTIN

Okay, right, so, like you're, you'd wake up in the night, and you'd smell burning, and… what did you do?

LYNNE

Well… I first checked that my house wasn't on fire.

MARTIN

Yeah… And then?

LYNNE

Go back to sleep.

MARTIN

And when it happened again, you would…?

LYNNE

Well, after a few times I realised, my house *wasn't* on fire, so I'd just go straight back to sleep.

MARTIN

O-kay.

What, what happened the first time you saw the ghost?

LYNNE

I mean… *[sigh]* she was *there*…

MARTIN

Oh, it's a 'she'. Okay, okay. So describe the ghost to me. It's, it's a

woman? A girl? A…

LYNNE

Yeah, yeah. A young woman.

MARTIN

And, and what was *she* doing?

LYNNE

I mean, she was on fire.

MARTIN

…

O-kay.

Erm, so, so she's on fire. So what did you do? You've, you, you, you're waking up in the night, and you're seeing a… a woman is on fire in your flat, so you…?

LYNNE

I mean… what can you do? She wouldn't be there for long.

MARTIN

Okay. Er… so, you didn't call the police or…?

LYNNE

[Snorts] Well, no. I mean, it sounds a bit crazy, doesn't it?

MARTIN

Okay, so…. So what is it that, sort of, made you… erm… *[sighs]*

Why are you here?

LYNNE

My friend told me that, y'know, this is where you report stuff like that, so…

MARTIN

O-kay.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[MOUTH SOUNDS WHILE SETTING UP RECORDER]

TIM

[Sounding tired] Right, so… tape's on.

Who are you?

'SMITH'

Er… I'm, um, I'm 'Smith'.

TIM

Just 'Smith'?

'SMITH'

Um, 'John'… 'John Smith'. *[Elongates vowels]* 'John Smith'.

TIM

Your name's 'John Smith'?

'SMITH'

'John Smith'.

TIM

[Very softly] Right, okay, good.

And… *[heavy sigh]* why are you here, 'Smith'?

'SMITH'

Er… well, um, I'm, I'm here coz, er… coz I have something to report. I'm, um, I'm worried.

TIM

Shouldn't you be going to the police potentially?

'SMITH'

Ah, I don't think they can help with *this.* Um…

TIM

Right. And so… what, what brings you here? What do you need help with?

'SMITH'

Well, I've, um, I've… er, I've *seen* some things.

TIM

Right.

'SMITH'

I think, er, I've, I've heard, er, er, your, your, er, your *field*… Found a few web pages, er… long time ago.

TIM

And can we talk about why it is *specifically* that you're here, Mr. Smith.

'SMITH'

Sure, sure.

Um, so, so you know Aldwych Tube station?

TIM

I do.

‘SMITH’

Um, it’s not, it’s not a Tube station any more, obviously, it’s abandoned now. Um, but I was, I was there with, er, an, an *associate,* er, we’ll call him… ‘Jeremy’…

TIM

Right.

Good.

‘SMITH’

And, er… we, we broke into the, the Tube station –

[TIM SIGHS]

– ‘coz we wanted to, have a, have a look around, ‘coz y’know –

TIM

What drove you to break into a Tube station, Mr. Smith?

‘SMITH’

Well… It’s… It’s part of, part of London’s history, y’know. It’s public transport, it’s interesting.

TIM

And you wanted to see the interesting things?

‘SMITH’

Yeah. I mean, y’know, there’s still trains running though at the platform level but there’s no… there’s no, the station isn’t running any more, it’s been abandoned. So much of the things there are all in original condition. Like they’ve still got the original adverts up and things like that.

TIM

Right… okay.

‘SMITH’

From when they shut it down. ‘coz they’ve never been removed.

TIM

But **why** specifically there Mr. ‘Smith’?

‘SMITH’

Oh, well, I mean, we had, we had some ideas about what, what might be down there. Y’know, it’s not, not just the, not just the, y’know, the public transport stuff and the adverts. We thought… might be something a little bit, a little bit more… I dunno, something, something worth investigating.

Um. We were down there, in the tunnels, and… and then the torches went out. And I think… *[sniffs]* I think they took him.

TIM

“They”?

‘SMITH’

Yeah, them. *Them.*

TIM

Okay. And who are *they?*

‘SMITH’

Well, I mean, you, you must know? I mean, like, this is the Magnus Institute. I mean, like, you **know** this stuff, right? You know, the people who are down in the tunnels, y’know…

TIM

What people are down in the tunnels, Mr. ‘Smith’?

‘SMITH’

The Government.

TIM

[Sighs] The Government?

‘SMITH’

Yeah, yeah, the Government.

TIM

Wonderful.

‘SMITH’

They’re down… they’ve got, they’ve got a holding facility down there. It’s a secret holding facility.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

BASIRA

Right. Statement of… Robin Lennox?

ROBIN

Well… my friends call me Rob, well, some of, some of my friends call me Rob. Er… a lot of my friends, I guess some of them call me Robin. You can call me… er, if it makes it easier for you, then, yeah, that’s –

BASIRA

May 20th 2017. About a stone circle, I think. That’s what you said?

ROBIN

Erm, so it started, it started on, er, a day, when me and, er, me and Jackie, we were walking – Jackie’s my dog.

BASIRA

Okay –

ROBIN

We were, we were walking down the South Downs, which is what we normally do, er, before we go visit my mother for a, for a roast. Um. We were walking down and, er –

Are you much of a dog person?

BASIRA

What day was it?

ROBIN

Um, so, this… when would this have been, now? Now, this was about, about two weeks ago, so what would, would, where are we now? Um, that would put it at, maybe, maybe the 6th, I think.

BASIRA

Okay.

ROBIN

Perhaps… So, so, me and Jackie were walking down, down our usual trail, down the South Downs, and, er, in Lewes, er, which, er, like I said, is where my mother lives. Um, so were walking, walking along just – er, Jackie just loves to run off the lash and just run,

scour around the fields and –

BASIRA

Okay. So you were walking, a couple of weeks ago –

ROBIN

Er, that's right, yes.

BASIRA

– it was about noon –

ROBIN

In the South Downs, yes.

BASIRA

– yes, in the South Downs.

ROBIN

And… off in the distance, something just caught my, something just caught my eye, and I, I have pretty good eyesight. I, er, I had them… had, had an eye test a few days ago –

BASIRA

Yes.

ROBIN

Y'know, one of those free ones that you get, you go along just for the sake of it –

BASIRA

What… What did you see?

ROBIN

Okay, right, so, I, I thought to myself that, that stone circle, *that* wasn't there before. At least, I thought it was a cir- a stone circle. So, so, me and Jackie went off to investigate – Jackie's quite a curious dog. Um, it's quite a normal thing for Jack, er, Jack Russell terriers to be curious animals –

BASIRA

So you went to investigate that?

ROBIN

Right, yes. So, so, we, we were, we were walking towards this, er, this, what I thought was a stone circle. So, I was, sort of, walking towards it, and I, I really noticed it got, it got quite a lot chillier. So it was quite a sunny day –

BASIRA

Okay.

ROBIN

– erm, I hadn't, I hadn't taken a jacket. Y'know when you sort of look out the window and you're like 'Today's a jacket day' –

BASIRA

[Desperately trying to get him on track] So you thought… you saw this stone circle?

ROBIN

Oh yes, yeah.

BASIRA

Started walking towards it?

ROBIN

That's right.

BASIRA

And then…?

ROBIN

Okay, so, so, yeah, it's like I said, it was definitely, definitely a bit, definitely a bit chillier. Um, I don't think there was any wind or anything that day, but it, yeah, just sort of, as I was walking towards it, felt, felt the chill. And I felt Jackie, sort of, start to walk closer to me. She started to run off a lot less, as if she sort of – I don't know, maybe I just sort of noticed th- y'know when you sort

of get a feeling for what mood a dog's in, um, when you sort of spend a lot of time around them –

BASIRA

So, what about this stone circle?

ROBIN

Oh, the stone circle. So, so, I got closer, and I realised that, although I hadn't seen, I hadn't seen the stone circle before, but the, the, sort of texture of the rocks and, maybe a bit of, er, I dunno, they looked quite old. They, they definitely looked like they *had* been there for a long time, but that they, but I recall them definitely not being there, 'cause, 'cause, I've taken that route maybe five or six or… *[mumbles]* a few times now. When was the first time I took that route? I think that was with –

BASIRA

So you don't remember seeing this before, but the rocks looked old?

ROBIN

Let me start again.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

MELANIE

Alright then. Statement of… Brian… er… ‘Fentinson’?

BRIAN1

Oh, um, it’s, it’s, it’s… it’s Fin-Finlinson.

MELANIE

Ah, right, sorry. That’s the… the handwriting here.

So. Statement regarding…

BRIAN

Sp-Spiders. B-B-But, I mean, lot, a lot of spiders!

MELANIE

Ah. Good. A spider one.

BRIAN

What?

MELANIE

Date: May 26th. And, er, go on… ah, let’s, let’s get this over with.

BRIAN

[Confused] Is… Look, is everything okay?

MELANIE

[Sighs] Yes. Yes, it's, it's fine. Sorry, I just, I just don't hold out a lot of hope for… coherence.

BRIAN

What?

MELANIE

Our Archivist is on leave.

BRIAN

I don't really. Look. I don't really like staying in one place too long.

MELANIE

Fine. Statement begins.

BRIAN

Oh, um, I…

MELANIE

That means get started.

BRIAN

Oh, um, so… The spiders, they're just, they're *all over* my flat. Hundreds of spiders, and it's freaky, like they just don't act like *spiders.* And they're leaving, like, web all over, all over my stuff, like on the sofa, and on like, on like, the microwave. Like, that's

weird, right? It's not how spiders normally are.

MELANIE

[Interjecting] So… let's, let's, let's, er, take this from a bit earlier. When did this start? When was the first "weird" spider?

BRIAN

A couple months? Nah, maybe a bit longer. Like, it, it started gradually, I guess. Like, y'know, I don't like spiders, and sometimes, sure, there's one in the bathroom, a little web or something, but that's normal. And I just, y'know, asked a friend to deal with it or something. And, and then… Suddenly there were more spiders! Like the corner of every room. And it's freaky 'cause there's, like, different *types* of spider. And different…

MELANIE 2

Right.

BRIAN

And they don't normally, like, gather in groups of different species. It's different species of spider, isn't it?

MELANIE

[Stuttering somewhat] I-I-I-I'm not familiar…

BRIAN

I feel like they're watching me!

MELANIE

What do you mean? Are they *looking*… at you?

BRIAN

They, they, they sort of *move* when I *move*. And, like, when I, when I go into a different room, I feel like there's a, there's a flow of spiders to the same room, or – But they don't let me touch them, or, or, if I try and whack 'em with a newspaper, they don't let me get near!

MELANIE

Right.

BRIAN

And then… and the weirdest thing was when I asked an exterminator to come and look at the problem. They all disappeared! It's like the first time I'd been, there'd been no spiders in weeks. And then suddenly, as soon as he leaves, they all come *back!* It's like suddenly they're there again!

MELANIE

[Trying to interrupt] Was… was… was that maybe the first time there had been another… person… looking at, at your flat?

BRIAN

Um. Well, I mean, I guess so? But no, ‘cause like –

MELANIE

Trying to pick this apart…

BRIAN

– I haven’t, haven’t invited someone to come over ‘cause there’s spiders and webs everywhere. But like – but there’s – I mean –

MELANIE

And the webbing…?

BRIAN

– Just think it’s the other day, they webbed, they webbed my bedroom door shut. I mean, that’s *weird,* right? Like, enough spiders leave enough web to seal the door. And they *trapped* me in there with the, all those spiders. That’s not *normal,* right?! That’s freaky! That’s supernatural!

MELANIE

But –

BRIAN

That’s what you guys do, isn’t it?

MELANIE

It does sound unusual…

BRIAN

Like, the supernatural, right?

MELANIE

Um… I mean, we're, we're an investigative… unit, but we're…

BRIAN

I just wanted some help! Like, I heard you guys like… I thought if you know about the supernatural, maybe you could help me deal with this!

MELANIE

I… *really* wish that was the case.

BRIAN

[Distressed] Oh god!

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

LYNNE

Yeah, and then… she… er, reached out to me.

MARTIN

Oh, okay. Okay, right, so she reached out, um, and then… what, what happened? She reached out to you, so what did you do?

LYNNE

Er… Well, not a lot.

MARTIN

Right.

Um, and, and then she just… disappeared like normal?

LYNNE

I mean… she burned me a bit.

MARTIN

Oh! Oh wow! Okay, er, like, are you okay? Did you –

LYNNE

Oh.

MARTIN

Was there, was there a lot of damage? Are you – Is there…?

LYNNE

No, no, no. It's… er, just, just a few hairs. My right arm. I mean

they, they've grown back.

MARTIN

Like, like a few hairs? So then…

And then she disappeared and you…?

LYNNE

I went back to sleep.

[MARTIN GATHERS HIMSELF WITH A LONG INTAKE OF BREATH]

MARTIN

Right. Erm…

And, well, then what happened? So, y'know, y'know, you've been burned by this, mys-mysterious ghost, so what did you do?

LYNNE

I mean, I moved out.

MARTIN

And nothing… nothing since then?

LYNNE

Well, no. I've, I've moved.

MARTIN

Right.

Erm, I'm – I don't suppose you've looked into the, the history of the building, or anything?

LYNNE

Why?

MARTIN

O-kay. Erm… Statement ends. I guess. Er… okay, yeah, great, um.

LYNNE

Cool.

MARTIN

Thanks so much for coming. Really appreciate it.

Erm, yeah, if you… yeah, if you head out, um, by the way that you came in, there's a woman at the front desk, she'll take your details down…

LYNNE

Great.

MARTIN

…and then we might, y'know, might be in contact about it in the

future if we, if we do any follow up, and need, need to talk to you about any specifics again, but… that probably won't…

LYNNE

Oh. You, you got everything then, yeah? That's…

MARTIN

Erm… Yeah. Yeah. Y'know what, yeah. I think, I think that's basically it, y'know. Th-Thanks so much for coming in, though. We do appreciate it.

LYNNE

Cool.

I know. Cool.

…

Er…

MARTIN

S-Sorry, is there, there is something else that, um…?

LYNNE

No, I just, just thought that maybe you would…

MARTIN

Er…

LYNNE

I mean, do I get… a… piece of paper or something?

To…

MARTIN

No, no, it's fine. It's, it's, it's fine.

LYNNE

…say that I've done it?

MARTIN

We, we, we keep an internal record.

LYNNE

I mean, do I… Is there, like… an invoice or something? I…

MARTIN

[Confused] In…? An… invoice?

For…?

LYNNE

I mean, just, just, my friend Gav said that, y'know, you guys… you need stories, and you need people to come forward, so…

MARTIN

Yeah, yeah…

LYNNE

And you… kind of…

You pay up people for their ghost stories, so…

MARTIN

Oh! Er, ah… *[Nervous chuckle]* I, I think there might be a bit of a, er, er, mis-miscommunication here –

LYNNE

Oh!

Oh, right, okay.

MARTIN

Yeah. Yeah… We don't actually, um… er, we don't pay for, pay for statements.

LYNNE

Right.

MARTIN

This is, this is more, a, er, documenting process than… er, we don't use these for, um, for stuff outside of –

LYNNE

Okay.

MARTIN

– r-r-records.

Ahh. I'm really sorry. Er…

LYNNE

Oh. I mean, I mean, that's why I –

Er, no, y'know, okay, but that's fine.

[MOMENTS OF EMBARRASSED MUMBLINGS]

MARTIN

Er…

Um…

Y'know what… Sorry. Um. Let's see what I've got…

[MOURNFUL SOUNDS OF MARTIN'S LOOSE CHANGE]

I mean, I've got… I mean… get a coffee, I…

LYNNE

Y'know what? You're, you're alright.

MARTIN

No, no, please, please? I…

LYNNE

Oh, alright.

MARTIN

Y'know, er…

LYNNE

Thanks, thanks.

MARTIN

…like, like a macchiato, or…

LYNNE

Mm.

MARTIN

I mean, maybe not that much.

LYNNE

Okay, so, um… just the way out…

[TRANSFER OF COINS]

MARTIN

Yeah.

LYNNE

…the way I came in?

MARTIN

Yeah, please. If that's… yeah.

[DOOR OPENS & CLOSES]

[MARTIN SIGHS WEARILY]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

TIM

[Wearily] Mr. Smith…

'SMITH'

[Irate] Look, Jeremy, is somewhere, under London, right now, having… **bioweapons** tested on him! Yeah! Like, and I know that, 100% certain, coz it's a **fact**!

TIM

I think you might possibly be looking for a different agency…

‘SMITH’

Well, I, I think so! I came here, because I have uncovered, like, a **massive** government conspiracy, yeah. And what are you doing? You’re like… you’re what? Just frowning at me sceptically.

TIM

It’s possible you should take that to someone else, Mr. Smith.

‘SMITH’

Well! Well probably! Probably I should do that!

Coz that’s a fat lot of use you are! Mendacists! You’re rubbish!

[TIM SIGHS HEAVILY, OBSCURING MR. SMITH’S PARTING WORDS]

TIM

Statement ends.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ROBIN

Yeah, people have always said to me that Jack Russells can be difficult dogs, but I've always found that, that, as long as you, sort of, treat them right, and, you know, give them lots of treats, and it's, it's really quite –

BASIRA

[Getting exasperated] **So** you were in the spiral, and you heard an old man crying?

ROBIN

As I was meandering around, and you know when you hear, you, you hear someone crying, but you, you, but you definitely sort of say that's, that's… that's, there's an *age* in that voice. Like it sounded… like, if you, have you heard many old men crying?

BASIRA

[Sharply interjects] So you were following…?

ROBIN

Yes, that's right. So, you know how, sort of, at places like Hampton Court, where they've got those little hedge mazes, and rather than, sort of, bounding straight into the middle of them, where you can just sort of walk over all the hedges, you have to, you have to, sort of, follow it through, er, I've, it sort of put in me in mind of that. As, er, as I sort of imagine myself in… exploring that maze –

BASIRA

So you followed the maze?

ROBIN

So I followed the, so I, yeah, so I followed the spiral, the spiral round and, er, I could definitely hear this sort of old man crying. And it d-d– It was definitely an *old* man, ‘cause it really reminded me of, er, this old chap I met once on a train, er, going, going to Liverpool. Er, he was, he was –

BASIRA

Mmmm, so… So what happened?

ROBIN

So, so… as I was going round, and, and hearing this old man, erm, I suddenly, suddenly realised that I was going to be late for… I was going to be late for my mum’s dinner that she had planned, er –

BASIRA

You… But… didn’t you say it was, it was about noon?

ROBIN

Well, that was the funny thing. So, you see, I, I looked at my watch, and I realised that six hours had gone by.

BASIRA

Six… Six hours?!

ROBIN

Yes, that's right. So, er, at that point, I, I left.

BASIRA

…

I'm sorry?

ROBIN

Yes, so I would, I would have been late for dinner, so…

BASIRA

So you left?

ROBIN

So I got out of the spiral, and went to dinner.

BASIRA

…

[BAFFLED VOCALISATIONS]

Statement ends… I suppose.

ROBIN

Is, is, is that all you need from me?

BASIRA

[Emphatically] Yep.

ROBIN

Are you sure?

BASIRA

Yep!

ROBIN

You don't, you don't need anything –

BASIRA

Absolutely!

ROBIN

You want any more details –

BASIRA

Nope! Thank you, Mr. Lennox.

ROBIN

Okay.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

BRIAN

[Highly anguished] …and I just, I dunno what to do anymore! I think they were following me. I think they followed me here! I saw a spider in the basement outside. And, and the webbing, it just… it had this webbing, the sticky kind… and I just… I don't know how I can keep… I just need… This is the first time I've been in a room where I haven't seen a spider –

MELANIE (BACKGROUND) 3

I…

Please, just…

There's, there's tea there.

Okay. Right. Yes.

Okay, breathe.

Yeah… well…

Drink, drink the tea.

BRIAN

– and maybe this is safe –

MELANIE

[Laughingly strangled] No-o-o-o-o. No.

BRIAN

– or maybe they're outside. I just don't know!

MELANIE

It's really…

BRIAN

I don't know how else –

MELANIE

It's really not safe.

BRIAN

[Wheezing distressedly] – carry on!

MELANIE

I'll, I'll get you some biscuits. I'll get you, I'll get you, I'll get you… something… Just breathe!

Breathe for me…

[BRIAN TAKES SOME CALMING DEEP BREATHS]

Okay, yes.

Good. Good.

[DOOR OPENS & CLOSES AS BRIAN CONTINUES TO BREATHE DEEPLY]

BRIAN

Sorry. I know I shouldn't…

I guess that's… that's everything. I, I just don't…

Oh.

[CHAIR SCRAPING ON FLOOR]

[Calling out] H-Hello?

Sorry. Did I…?

I don't, don't know…

[MORE CHAIR SCRAPING]

Should I just… go?

Hello?

[VERY SHARP SQUEAL OF DISTORTION]

PETER

Excuse me?

BRIAN

[Taken aback] Woah.

PETER

Do you work here?

BRIAN

Oh, er… no, I… Hi.

PETER

I'm looking for Elias Bouchard? He runs this Institute. I do have an appointment.

BRIAN

I don't, um… I'm, I'm sorry. I was just, um… but everyone… just went.

Sorry. B-Brian. B-Brian Finlinson.

PETER

[Brightly] Peter Lukas. Lovely to meet you, Brian.

Now. Am I to understand you *don't* work here?

BRIAN

No… I was just, um… making a statement, or, or whatever. Um…

PETER

That's probably for the best. Elias can be quite… 'protective' of his people. Never really understood why. I mean, in the end, the only person that you really have is yourself.

Wouldn't you agree, Brian?

BRIAN

[Thoroughly confused] I don't… What?

PETER

Well. Plenty of time to make your mind up, I'm, I'm sure.

Now… If you'll excuse me, like I said, I have an appointment to get to. You are *sure* you don't know where Elias Bouchard's office is?

BRIAN

No.

I'm, I'm sorry.

PETER

Not to worry. I'm sure I can find it.

And I'm sure you need some time to get used to your new situation.

BRIAN

[Softly] What?

PETER

Good luck Brian.

[VERY SHARP SQUEAL OF DISTORTION]

BRIAN

Yeah… Thanks… Uh… I – Oh.

Hello?

H-Hello?

[CLICK]

1. Transcriber's Note: Brian is a lot more 'angsty' and stammers more than can be realistically captured in this transcript. ↩
2. Transcriber's Note: Throughout Brian's statement, Melanie repeatedly makes general noises of agreement or acknowledgement. ↩
3. Transcriber's Note: Melanie and Brian's speech occur somewhat concurrently, as she tries to get him to calm down. ↩

MAG101 – Another Twist

Statement #UNKNOWN

[CLICK]

[LOW BACKGROUND SOUNDS, POSSIBLY VOCAL; VOICES SOUND AS IF SOMEWHERE BELOW GROUND]

ORSINOV

[Sing-song] Oh, it does work! What have you been recording? Anything spooky?

ARCHIVIST

[GAGGED REPLY]

ORSINOV

Is it… your Elias who listens?

Hellooooooo!

[MORE MUFFLED WORDS FROM THE ARCHIVIST]

He's mine now, and you can't have him back.

[BACKGROUND HUMMING IS NOW POSITIVELY CHORAL]

ARCHIVIST

[QUESTIONING SOUNDS]

ORSINOV

Oh, don't worry, it's not for **you**. You won't even need a coffin – we're going to use every piece of *you*.

ARCHIVIST

[MUFFLED EXCLAMATION]

ORSINOV

Now could you two *please* move that thing somewhere far, far away?

BREEKON

Not really.

HOPE

Needs to be near us.

ORSINOV

Well, just… just move yourselves away, and take it with you.

BREEKON

Gotcha

HOPE

Right you are.

[CHAINS RATTLE AS THEY PICK UP THE COFFIN AND DEPART; CHORAL HUM FADES, REPLACED BY BACKGROUND SOUND OF RAIN OUTSIDE, SOMEWHERE]

ORSINOV

Right. Where were we?

ARCHIVIST

[MUFFLED INDIGNATION]

ORSINOV

Oh, of course! So, Elias, can I call you Elias? Let me set the scene, as I know you can't actually see this. He's tied to a chair – Sarah wanted to use nails, but I talked her out of it because I'm a *good* friend. You're welcome. And he is absolutely *surrounded* with waxworks. Not… *good* waxworks, though. Weird ones. Wax faces where you feel like you almost recognise who it's meant to be, but, then instead… ah, it's downright uncanny!

ARCHIVIST

[MORE MUFFLED INDIGNATION, POSSIBLY MUFFLED SWEARING TOO]

ORSINOV

Excuse me! I'm talking to your boss, and I would thank you not to interrupt.

[ARCHIVIST CONTINUES TO GRUNT THROUGHOUT]

You know, I must say Elias, can I call you Elias? You have not raised this one very well.

ARCHIVIST

[MUFFLED REFUTATION?]

ORSINOV

He is *rude.* And he just will not stop asking questions. Ooh, but now, **I** can ask the questions! How are you *feeling?*

ARCHIVIST

[MUFFLED FEELINGS]

ORSINOV

Oh, wonderful. Now, about the whole skin thing… You see, originally, I was just planning to have you followed, in case you *found* that ancient relic one. I mean, my goodness, it is *very* powerful. And if you didn't come through, well, *you're* quite powerful yourself, and more than that, you are… *symbolically* appropriate *[chuckles]* so I thought you'd make a lovely frock!

ARCHIVIST

[MUFFLED PANIC]

ORSINOV

Exactly! And, well, I was *going* to wait, but… y'know, have you ever had one of those backup plans that, when you think about it, they're, they're just more fun? So, I thought, out with the old, in with… well, in with the **you**!

ARCHIVIST

[PADDED PANICKY PROSTESTATIONS]

ORSINOV

Oh, no, I'm afraid he can't See you, can you Elias, can I call you Elias? What's the point of having a *secret* place of power if you can't hide it from a big, stupid eye? Anyway, you sit tight. Lots to do! Ooh, also, do you have a preferred brand of lotion? Because you have not been taking care of your skin, and we really do need it in

better shape before we peel you.

ARCHIVIST

[EVEN MORE MUFFLED INDIGNATION]

ORSINOV

Alright, I'll just ask them to pick up a selection.

[FOOTSTEPS LEAVE AND A DOOR CLOSES]

[THE ARCHIVIST IS BREATHING HEAVILY]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[STILL RAINING]

[THE ARCHIVIST IS STILL BREATHING]

[STATICKY LAUGHTER FADES INTO HEARING]

[A DIFFERENT DOOR OPENS]

MICHAEL

Oh… Oh… Oh, Archivist. What have you done now? It's almost sad to see you like this.

ARCHIVIST

[LOW IRRITATED GROAN]

MICHAEL

Almost.

I've come to a decision, Archivist. *I'm going to kill you.*

ARCHIVIST

[FRUSTRATED GROAN]

MICHAEL

It's earlier than I had hoped, but that's life… I suppose. Your life. *[Giggles]* Before I do, however, I want you to understand… even if it does go against my nature. So.

[THE GAG IS REMOVED; THE ARCHIVIST GASPS]

[Enunciating each word carefully] Ask your questions.

ARCHIVIST

What?

MICHAEL

Ask me.

ARCHIVIST

H-How did you find me?

MICHAEL

[Giggles] The Eye watches, and the Stranger conceals, but me… I lie, Archivist. I am the throat of delusion incarnate. They can't hide you from me.

[GASPS AS THE ARCHIVIST CONTINUES TO RECOVER]

ARCHIVIST

What do you have to do with the Unknowing?

MICHAEL

Nothing. *[Giggles]* Nothing whatsoever. Except perhaps that I would like it to fail.

ARCHIVIST

So… wh-*why* are you here?

MICHAEL

I already said. To kill you.

ARCHIVIST

But – but why?

MICHAEL

Because I don't want the Circus to win. And I don't want the Archives to, either. Killing you myself… it's the best of both. And, of course, there's revenge.

ARCHIVIST

Revenge? I still don't even know who you are!

MICHAEL

I am Michael. I was not *always* Michael. I do not *want to be* Michael. Being Michael stole the only purpose I have ever known.

ARCHIVIST

You were Gertrude's assistant, weren't you?

MICHAEL

No.

ARCHIVIST

But, but the tape – I heard you.

MICHAEL

[Slowly] **No.** You heard Michael.

[FRUSTRATED SOUNDS FROM THE ARCHIVIST]

ARCHIVIST

I… What the hell are you talking about?!

MICHAEL

Quiet, Archivist. The cramped casket sings loud, but not loud enough to drown out screaming. The Michael on that tape was not me. When that person was Michael, I was something else, and now **I** am Michael, and that person is gone.

ARCHIVIST

So, what… You… you became him?

MICHAEL

No more than he became me. It is rare that someone I take finds their way into being me, but it does happen. And Michael had help.

ARCHIVIST

What happened?

MICHAEL

Hm…

Ahhh, a *statement.* Of course. Is your recorder running?

Yes. Say it, Archivist.

ARCHIVIST

Statement of… Michael. Taken from subject. Date…

MICHAEL

The last day of the Archivist's life.

ARCHIVIST

Statement begins.

MICHAEL (STATEMENT)

How far back should it go? To the beginning of me? Centuries? Millennia? How do you define the start of your being when in some ways you have *always* been? Time is difficult to form. Michael Shelley, though, he is easier to keep track of. He was born. He was pointless. And he should have died. But before that could happen, he went to work for the Magnus Institute – that ivory tower, keeping its prisoners ignorant in pursuit of… knowledge. *[Giggles]* A dungeon full of idiot watchers. And Michael Shelley was no exception.

When he was in school, he lost a friend to something like me. His friend was named Ryan, but those in power simply called him schizophrenic. I don't know if he was, but it doesn't matter. He was so dreadfully afraid his world wasn't real that to make it so was almost nothing. Michael was there when he was taken; he never got over what he saw. Or didn't see. After much searching and despair, it drove him into the waiting arms of the Institute, where he met

Gertrude Robinson. The Archivist.

Even being what I am, I have rarely seen anyone so adept at distorting the truth as Gertrude Robinson. Michael was protective of the frail old woman he believed her to be. So… so delicate, so forgetful, yet gently wise. He *cared* for her. He *trusted* her. And she *fed him* to me. She made him me to destroy our transcendence. And she did not hesitate.

Poor Michael. He had been on trips for the Institute before. Conferences, investigations, Gertrude had made sure that all her assistants were ready. That none of them would be suspicious if they were told they were going abroad for work. So there was no doubt in his mind, no concern, when she told him that they were travelling to Russia. Perhaps if he'd have stopped to look up their destination, he might have discovered there was no such place as Zemlya Sannikova, but he did not. He trusted her.

Even when they arrived in Dikson, at the edge of the Kara Sea, and they were picked up by a quiet sea captain called Peter Lukas… Even then he trusted her. They travelled north, through cold far more bitter than any Michael had even conceived possible. And do you know what he worried about? *[Giggles]* He… worried about Gertrude Robinson. About how this poor old woman might cope with the chill. But now she was like iron, and walked with a purpose that Michael had never before seen in her. The water turned to ice as the Arctic approached, and Gertrude's eyes turned cold.

Then, at last, he began to be afraid. He asked her where they were going and was told again: Zemlya Sannikova. Sannikov Land. There was a great evil, she said, and Michael was going to help her fight it. Am I evil, Archivist? Is a thing evil when it simply obeys its own nature? When it *embodies* its nature? When that nature is created by those which revile it? Perhaps Gertrude believed so. Michael certainly did. He believed everything she told him.

And it was **me** they sought to stop. Me and the others of It-Is-Not-What-It-Is. Our Great Twisting. The-Worker-of-Clay had laboured for decades on that contorted, *impossible* edifice of doors… and stairs… and falsehoods… and smiles. A thousand staring morsels stood, and not one of them believed themselves sane to look upon it. And in the centre, the door that would open to all the places that were never there, was me. I use the word 'apotheosis' not because it is correct, but because I can only show you its truth when we are within the passages themselves.

And this is what Michael and Gertrude found when they set foot on Sannikov Land, which does not exist and never has. It was warm, and feeling its reassurance beneath his feet was the last time poor, doomed Michael knew comfort. They walked through the green jungle of that forever-elusive polar island, and up the gentle mountains that can never have a name. And at the top, they found us through our spiralling laughter. And they saw us in all of our glory.

Michael did not go mad, though no words you could have said would have convinced him otherwise. The mind does not shatter,

Archivist. It is soft and malleable. It bends and twists and returns to what it was, though what you see and feel may leave their mark upon it. If Michael thought he had lost his mind, it was only because what he saw with crystal clarity was simply not something that *could* be real.

But Gertrude Robinson did not waver. She did not… hesitate. She gave no indication that she saw anything more or less than was expected. Hers was not a mind that left room for doubt. She stared into us carefully, her eyes scanning for something that was my heart. Looking for my door. And she found it.

Perhaps I should have realised what was happening; seen those two lonely figures approaching me, but I cannot tell you the existential joys of truly… becoming. Of an entireness finally crossing the threshold into your self. So ecstatic was my completeness, I did not even hear my own door creak open. Because Gertrude had told Michael how he could stop us. She told him to walk through a door. And even then, with so much of his mind shut down in panic and terror, he *trusted* her. And he went inside, closing the door behind him.

But Gertrude Robinson had given poor, disposable Michael one more thing before sending him to me. She had given him a map. I couldn't say how she would have gotten such a thing, or if she somehow made it. And yet it was a map. A map to me. It made no sense, lines overlapping and inverting, but once within, Michael knew which turns to make, which doors to open, which mirrors to shatter. Until he became *me.*

Even sharper than the joy of becoming is the agony of being opened and remade. To have your who torn bloody from your what, and another crudely lashed into its place. To *become* Michael. And to do so at such a crucial point in our Twisting, in our becoming, well of course it destroyed it. The impossible altar collapsed. The-Worker-of-Clay tore out his veins to dissolve himself in crimson mud. The others of us were cast to all the places that aren't; some have still not found their way out again. And somehow, Gertrude Robinson was back on that boat before Sannikov Land once again never existed.

And all that was left was me. Michael. *[Giggles]* My very existence tied to my *pointlessness.* Wearing my *failure* as the very fabric of my being. Reduced once again to feeding on the unsuspecting and confused. That is who I am.

[DEEP GASP FROM THE ARCHIVIST]

ARCHIVIST

But you… You never tried to take revenge on Gertrude?

MICHAEL

She knew how to protect herself. She knew what she was creating. And killing her was not as important. She wasn't as good an Archivist as you are.

ARCHIVIST

So why not kill me before?

MICHAEL

I had hoped that you would stop the Unknowing first, destroy the workings of I-Do-Not-Know-You. But instead you are here, and may bring it about faster. So better your death happens now.

ARCHIVIST

I-is there anything I can do to stop you from killing me?

MICHAEL

[Laughs] If you scream loud enough the Circus may take notice of me, but… I promise you will die far more pleasantly with me than with them.

[MORE LAUGHTER]

Ah…

[RAIN CONTINUES TO FALL]

ARCHIVIST

…

[Defeated] Okay.

MICHAEL

Good. Right this way.

[A DOOR CREAKS]

Open it. Open it, and all this will be over.

[THE ARCHIVIST TURNS THE HANDLE AND HEARS AN ENGAGED LOCK]

ARCHIVIST

Er, it's…

[HANDLE IS TRIED TWICE MORE]

MICHAEL

What?

ARCHIVIST

It's locked.

MICHAEL

It's not. *[Giggles]*

ARCHIVIST

Why is it locked?

MICHAEL

It can't be!

ARCHIVIST

Well, you try it!

[FRANTIC HANDLE TURNING – THE LOCK CONTINUES TO CLICK]

MICHAEL

[Worried] Th-Tha-That-That's… not –

[Realisation dawns] Oh. Oh no.

[DISTORTED SCREAMS OF PAINFUL AND TERMINAL OPENING]

[THE NEW DOOR CREAKS OPEN]

HELEN

Do you want to come in?

ARCHIVIST

Wh… Helen? H-Helen Richardson? But… But y– Michael…

HELEN

Michael isn't me. Not now.

ARCHIVIST

What happened?

HELEN

He got… distracted. Let feelings that shouldn't have been his overwhelm me.

Lost my way.

ARCHIVIST

And now? Y-_you're_ Helen?

HELEN

I don't know. I never know, not really. Do I need a name?

ARCHIVIST

Ah… No, I s-suppose not.

HELEN

Helen is… better than Michael.

ARCHIVIST

But she's gone.

HELEN

Yes. As is Michael. There's only me.

ARCHIVIST

I… Okay.

HELEN

Do you still want to leave here?

ARCHIVIST

A-are you still going to kill me?

HELEN

No. That was Michael's desire, not mine.

ARCHIVIST

So… S-so what **do** you want?

HELEN

I don't know. Helen liked you, so… there's a lot to consider. But I will help you leave.

ARCHIVIST

Wait, is this… Mic– Y-You're the Distortion, the, the, the Liar. How do I know this isn't… a, a trick?

HELEN

And if it was, what would you do about it?

ARCHIVIST

…

Right. Right…

[Plaintive] How long have I… b-been here? There's no… It was hard to keep track –

HELEN

Time is hard, Archivist. It's difficult to follow without a proper mind, especially here. A while.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

HELEN

The door is open, if you're ready?

ARCHIVIST

No, not, not really, but…

[DEEP SIGH FOLLOWED BY STATIC]

[CLICK]

MAG102 - Nesting Instinct

Statement #0140406

[CLICK]

ELIAS

Look, John, I understand you're upset.

ARCHIVIST

A month, Elias. And you did what, nothing?

ELIAS

I was doing everything in my power to locate you.

[DISMISSIVE SNORT FROM THE ARCHIVIST]

Everyone was working on finding the ritual site.

ARCHIVIST

You didn't tell them I'd been *kidnapped,* though, did you?

ELIAS

It wouldn't have helped matters. Martin's research, at least, would have been sloppier.

ARCHIVIST

And imagine what might have happened if your rescue had been slower.

ELIAS

Sarcasm isn't going to help, John.

ARCHIVIST

The only thing here that "isn't going to help" is **you**. I am *sick* of relying on the *kindness* of things whose stated intention is to kill me.

ELIAS

[Irritated] I am sorry, John, that my powers have not yet reached the level of omniscience. And I am sorry that I have to spend so much time trying to help you develop your own faculties, rather than explaining everything to you like a child. But you have a job to do, and I *cannot* fight your battles for you.

ARCHIVIST

As far as I can tell, the only battles *I've* been fighting have been yours and Gertrude's.

ELIAS

I should have thought preventing the horrific transformation of our world is not solely my concern!

ARCHIVIST

…

Fine. At least we now know you're of zero practical use here. So aside from sending me other people's statements, what can you actually *do* to help?

ELIAS

I have been trying to give you the information you need.

ARCHIVIST

Sure, when you're not bashing its head in with a pipe.

ELIAS

Leitner was… I will admit I possibly… overreacted to his sudden re-emergence.

ARCHIVIST

He could have helped.

ELIAS

You? No. To you he offered nothing but the *crutch* of simple answers. If I hadn't stepped in he could have significantly stunted your development. Left you defenceless.

ARCHIVIST

[Sarcastically] Yeah. I can't imagine what it must feel like to be defenceless.

ELIAS

I do regret…

Gertrude's notes on the Unknowing are… lacking. I only shared the statements for a reason.

ARCHIVIST

S– You didn't even know why you were sending them to me, did you? Just, what, a box of random files she labelled? You were hoping **I** could figure out the reason Gertrude chose them!

ELIAS

There is a possibility some of them were misfiled.

[DEEP BREATH]

ARCHIVIST

So what do we actually *know?*

ELIAS

John –

[TABLE SLAP FROM THE ARCHIVIST]

ARCHIVIST

Don't you dare "John" me. If you want my help, I'm going to need that crutch.

ELIAS

Gertrude believed that the Unknowing was going to take the form of a dance. It required a great deal of intact human skin to clothe what she referred to as the, er, the "corpse de ballet", though I suspect that's just her sense of humour. There is also one, the "Danseuse Étoile" that requires a costume of special power or distinction. Gertrude believed that Orsinov and his circus created a dancer specifically for this role.

ARCHIVIST

I-I've met it. Calls itself Nikola.

ELIAS

There's also something else in the notes she calls the Choir, but no real detail on that. As far as where it will happen, it's a, a –

ARCHIVIST

A wax museum. Old, mostly a-abandoned, I think. I-I don't know exactly where, but –

ELIAS

That still narrows it down significantly. I'll, I'll have the others start

digging.

ARCHIVIST

How do we – How do *I* stop it?

ELIAS

Gertrude seemed to think that once the dance begins it's tied to its location. Sufficiently disrupting that might be enough to derail the ritual. She mentioned she had acquired… something, for this purpose, but she gave no detail as to exactly what that might be.

ARCHIVIST

And you can't just… *See* where she put it.

ELIAS

She was… She got very good at hiding things from me.

ARCHIVIST

How embarrassing for you. Is there anyone else who might know what it is, or, or where? Aside from Leitner, or Gerard?

ELIAS

Sorry, Gerard Keay?

ARCHIVIST

Uh… yes?

ELIAS

How did you… Who, who told you he was working with Gertrude?

ARCHIVIST

No-one, I-I-I just… I read it in one of the statements.

ELIAS

I don't think you did.

ARCHIVIST

But… ah…

ELIAS

You just *knew* it.

ARCHIVIST

What, no, I… Th-that's not a –

ELIAS

No, no, no. No, John, this is good. It's a promising development.

ARCHIVIST

[Getting flustered] No, No I… It's just, it's just… just deduction or –

ELIAS

Is this the first time it's happened?

ARCHIVIST

Look, look, I don't – Look… Haaa… Gerard's not really a lead. He's dead. Isn't he?

ELIAS

Yes, but I believe he and Gertrude travelled together, shortly before he passed away. Perhaps if we could retrace their steps, we might find something.

ARCHIVIST

And by "we", you of course mean…

ELIAS

I'll see if I can hunt down a few relevant statem– Ahh.

ARCHIVIST

What?

ELIAS

[Sighs] Melanie is on her way up here with a knife. Could you talk to her for me?

ARCHIVIST

O-ah. S-Sorry, what?

ELIAS

She's hoping that even if I see it coming she'll still be able to overpower me.

ARCHIVIST

Ah –

ELIAS

She's wrong, of course, but I'd be keen to avoid that sort of struggle.

ARCHIVIST

She, she's trying to kill you?

ELIAS

Yes. Again. Even more than the others she has a visceral hatred of being trapped. Regardless of how much freedom I afford her.

ARCHIVIST

I don't – uh…

[KNOCKING AT DOOR]

ELIAS

Come in, Melanie.

[DOOR OPENS]

MELANIE

Elias, hi, just brought –

ARCHIVIST

Ah…

MELANIE

What are *you* doing here?

ARCHIVIST

Put the knife down, Melanie.

Melanie!

MELANIE

[Angrily] Get out of my way!

ARCHIVIST

I don’t believe – This isn’t the way.

MELANIE

You haven’t been here! You don’t know –

ARCHIVIST

I was kidnapped!

MELANIE

Oh. Sorry.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, yeah El-Elias… is –

MELANIE

Seriously?! Seriously? You too? Has he got everyone fooled? If he dies, we die? It's not even a good lie.

ARCHIVIST

Why would – I mean, why would it not be true? If he's managed to, to bind us… Why wouldn't he be able to, to do that?

MELANIE

John, look at me. There is only one way out of this, and it is through him.

ARCHIVIST

I get, I get that you hate being here, Melanie, but do you really want to trade it for prison?

MELANIE

No! But the way I see it, the police seem really keen not to investigate crimes committed here.

ELIAS

That's actually fair.

ARCHIVIST

Shut up!

Melanie, please.

MELANIE

[Frustrated anger] It's not just being stuck here, John. It's not just me. He's manipulating you, he's manipulating all of us. Can you seriously not see that? He's pulling all the strings, and I don't think there's any other way to stop it. So get out of my way.

ARCHIVIST

Look, I-I'm sorry, Melanie, but we need him. We, We will… We will find a way to deal with i– with him. Not today. A-And not like this.

ELIAS

I **am** still here, you know.

ARCHIVIST

And if you weren't, I assume you would be watching this conversation, so… Melanie, we can't do this. Not yet.

MELANIE

…

Alright.

[METAL CLINKS ON TABLE]

We'll try it your way. But whatever your way *actually* is, you'd better figure it out fast. Because it is your fault that I'm here. Fix it, or get out of the way!

[DOOR SLAMS SHUT]

ELIAS

Thank you, John.

ARCHIVIST

[Hissed] Shut up!

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of François Deschamps, regarding the family and presumed marriage of Benoît Maçon. Statement given June 4th, 2014. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Why do you need me to live it over again? To recount a story you know well enough already.

You were there, at least for the parts worth discussing. You want me to tell you what happened before then? How I met Benoît? His character? How he became my friend?

Truth be told, he was not my friend. He was simply a colleague, someone I might describe myself as well-disposed to, but probably not even that. It may seem dismissive to you, but in my experience there are two situations where one finds themselves working behind a bar when over the age of forty. The first is that you own the establishment yourself, what the English call ‘a publican’, and see no reason to hire others to perform duties you are quite capable of yourself.

The second is when a profound failure in your life has brought you to the middle of your life with no wealth, no prospects, and no skills that could be applied in more lucrative avenues. Suffice it to say that Benoît Maçon did not own Le Papillon Blanc.

It was not one of the most fashionable spots in Toulouse, sitting just on the edge of where the tourist-facing centre meets the firmly residential, and never quite settling on either side. It billed as a cafe in the day, but most of its business was after dark, when all pretence was dropped, and it became simply a comparatively cheap

place to drink. I worked the bar there with Benoît and a few others, and had done for a couple of years since I left school. Of all the others who worked Le Papillon alongside me, I would probably have said that Benoît was the one who interested me the least. There was an air of sadness about him, a melancholy that I found unsurprising, given the position he had found himself in, but distasteful nonetheless. My own life has certainly had its hardships, and I cannot help but detest those who indulge in self-pity. Though… having seen his fate, perhaps some pity was earned.

Benoît was, as far as I could tell, all alone in the world, and rather unhappy about the fact. It was rare that the topic of parents or family would be raised or discussed without his appearing, as if from nowhere, to quietly volunteer the fact that his parents were dead, or his lack of siblings, or whatever it might have been. Whatever familial bond was the topic of conversation, Benoît Maçon did not have it, and expected, no, demanded that you pity him for the fact. It will not surprise you to learn he wore no wedding ring. That when a young couple would enter the cafe to pass their time in wine and affection, he would simply stare at them, his face a mask of ill-concealed envy. I am deeply grateful it was rare that we had children in Le Papillon, as the one time they came in while he was on shift with him, he vanished for almost twenty minutes and, when he returned, it was clear he'd been crying. All told, he was a pathetic, lonely man desperate for any human connection. A connection I had no intention of offering him.

Quite frankly, I believe I have spoken more words about Benoît

Maçon in the last five minutes than I did in all the many months we worked together. I wasn't even the one that noticed the changes in his behaviour. That was our manager Lucille. About five weeks ago, she offhandedly asked me if I knew of any "alteration" in Benoît's personal or home life. He had, so she told me, been significantly more cordial with her over the previous few days. He had been smiling, laughing, generally not acting like himself. I told her I didn't know and hadn't noticed, but the next shift I saw what she meant. It was as though a different man were wearing the skin of Benoît, a man who had always known the deep joys of life.

I watched this new person go about their happy life for almost an entire night before I finally decided that I simply had to ask him what had happened. At first he appeared puzzled by my question, but when I told him how much happier he seemed, his smile grew wide. He leaned in close to me and looked around playfully, as if pretending to check for eavesdroppers. "A woman," he said at last, "François, I am in love. And she loves me!" And then, without warning he grabbed me with both arms and pulled me into a short embrace, which I was simply too stunned to resist.

Up close, I could not help but notice the faintest of odours from his skin. It was a damp smell, like decaying wood, and it wasn't until I had a chance to shower and change my clothes after work that I finally managed to rid myself of it completely. It was not a pleasant smell, certainly, but it was not *awful.* What bothered me was its presence at all. I knew Benoît to be a clean, almost fastidious man, prone to wearing slightly too much cologne. This was new, and

beyond that there was… something to the smell itself, some memory of a childhood spent in the country around Lyon, of wandering out in the damp heat after a summer rain, of turning over logs slick with moisture, to reveal the crawling underbelly beneath them. But for the most part I ignored it. After all, if I could remain unconcerned about Benoît when he was miserable, doing so when he was happy hardly seemed like a challenge.

And indeed, he continued to be happy, almost to the point of bliss, for almost the entire month following. The smell was growing ever so gradually stronger, to the point where I would occasionally see my colleagues wrinkle their noses when he went to talk to them, but it never quite reached the stage where it felt worth bringing up with Lucille. Benoît's hygiene more generally also started to noticeably decline. At first, his shirts would be wrinkled when he arrived for work, when before I had only ever seen him wear them crisply ironed. Then there were small stains or tears that could be spotted, as his clothes seemed to be washed less and less regularly. Again, none of this was glaringly obvious, and if his behaviour hadn't drawn my attention, it's likely I never would have noticed it at all. Certainly none of the patrons of Le Papillon Blanc ever seemed bothered by his appearance or cleanliness.

Through all of it, he would talk incessantly to anyone who would listen about this woman who had apparently changed his life, "mon petit scarabée", his little beetle. I was never able to get her actual name from Benoît, as he only seemed to refer to her by that weird nickname. Clear details were also difficult to establish: he could talk

for an hour over what his little beetle had told him over breakfast, but when asked about what she did, where she was from, what she looked like, he would always find a way to talk around it and shift the conversation in a new direction. We managed to establish that she had children, as Benoît would often make reference to “the little ones”, his eyes lighting up with parental pride. They couldn’t have been his, obviously, but that didn’t seem to matter to him. But, as with their mother, solid details about these children were almost impossible to establish. I would have suspected this new family of his wasn’t even real, were it not for the fact that he was clearly not faking his joy or contentment. Either his “petit scarabée” was real, or Benoît was suffering from a very complex delusion indeed. It never occurred to me it might have been both.

It was… two days ago that it happened. I was thinking earlier how unlikely it was, to have been looking so precisely at such a specific spot at such a specific time as to make me absolutely sure of what I witnessed. If I had glanced over a second later or only caught it from the corner of my eye, I could easily have dismissed it. After all, the simple presence of insects is not, in and of itself, remarkable. It was where this particular insect came from, however, that shook me so deeply. Benoît was leaning over the bar, listening to a young man who, I believe, was ordering for quite a large group. As this customer listed off his drinks, Benoît’s hand rested lightly upon the countertop, and I found, for no reason I could readily provide, my gaze was resting upon the fingers of his hand.

Without any warning, or reaction from Benoît himself, there seemed

to be movement from the ring finger of his right hand. A slight shudder, a shifting of the skin beneath his fingernail. A small patch of darkness seemed to grow just below it, expanding until it resolved itself into the shape of an insect. It pushed itself smoothly and quickly out from below his fingernail and dropped down onto the bar, scuttling away and out of sight so quickly I lost it almost immediately. It had all happened in a matter of moments, and there was no blood, no reaction from Benoît, no evidence that it had truly happened at all, apart from my shaking legs and the feeling I was going to collapse. And it was in that state that your associate found me.

At the time I thought he was your son. His French was significantly better than yours, and it took some time and some difficulty translating before I could fully explain to you what had happened. You rebuffed all my questions about your interest in Benoît and his situation, as you resolutely have since. I am… telling you my story, since you have asked so nicely, but I will never truly forgive either of you for what you have shown me. I should have been more suspicious of this man, too old for his poorly dyed hair, leading me to an old woman who promised me answers in exchange for an address. I should have walked away. I shouldn't have offered to go with you. But I was in shock from what I had seen, and I believe you could have told me to do almost anything, and I would have been unlikely to argue. You tried to cross-examine me about things I didn't understand: "Étranger ou la saleté?" I honestly had no idea what you were talking about, but I didn't put up a fight when you told me to get Benoît's address. I don't know why you agreed when

I asked to come with you. I wish you hadn't.

Do you really need me to describe it? You saw it for yourselves. The flowing tide that swarmed and scuttled as soon as the door opened. The smell that rolled out of that apartment like a choking wall. The *thing* that embraced Benoît. Mon petit scarabée. The only thing I don't know is if you saw in as much detail as I did the look of sheer contentment and joy on poor Benoît's face as his family crawled all over him. I don't care about what the police might have done; your young colleague was right. You should have burned the place to the ground. I have nothing more to say to you.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Th– *[Sighs]*

This is, um…

[PAPER RUSTLING]

This is written in French. A-All of it.

I don't… I don't speak French. I-I don't read… I've never…

[Sigh] I wish I could find it in myself to be surprised.

[MORE PAPER RUSTLING]

Er, statement, it seems, given directly to Gertrude. Though not apparently recorded. Did she perhaps leave her tape recorder at home when she took this little 'field trip' with Gerard? June 2014. Barely a year before her murder, and less than half that before Gerard Keay's brain tumour would lead to his own death. Did he know already? That his life was ending? Was he trying to accomplish one last good deed before the end? Were they both?

"Étranger ou la saleté?" Foreigner or dirt. Stranger or Filth. I can see why with limited information Mr. Deschamps' account could lend itself to either interpretation: sudden appearance of a vague and previously unknown figure inserting itself into someone's life on the one hand, and on the other… bugs and bad smells. Let it never be said the Hive and its ilk are subtle. Still, closer examination points pretty conclusively in that direction. It must have been a disappointment, especially if, as I suspect, Gertrude and Gerard were searching for information on the Unknowing.

Basira did some cursory follow-up on the statement itself. Benoît Maçon definitely died in late June 2014, but the Toulouse police records regarding the matter are firmly sealed. François Deschamps has refused our request for a follow-up interview. He did forward us one item, however. *[Snorts]* I can't read the French on this one, but it appears to be a crudely printed wedding invitation. Benoît Maçon is the only name legible on it, as most of the details are obscured by a wide variety of dried stains.

Most helpful of all, though, is the simple fact that Gertrude was in Toulouse in June 2014. The information I found from her laptop

doesn't give a complete picture of her travels, but now I know when to look, and it appears that when she left Toulouse she did not return to London. Instead, it looks like she took several connecting flights, eventually ending up in Wellington International Airport in New Zealand. I can't find any other details on the computer, but I'm going to ask the others to see if they can hunt down any statements referencing New Zealand in or around mid-2014. It might be a wild goose chase, but it's the best lead I have.

In the meantime I… I have a new flat. I should try to get comfortable, change the locks. Even if I might need to be leaving it for a while. Oh, and… I suppose I… I did tell Georgie I'd try to talk to Martin.

[DEEP SIGH]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

You're sure you don't mind?

MARTIN

No, no, no, it's fine, I've… I've kind of stopped noticing if I'm honest. They just sort of… turn themselves on these days.

…

Look I'm, I'm *so* sorry, John, I – Elias didn't even tell any of us that you'd been kidnapped. I didn't know – No-one else was telling me – And there wasn't any –

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Hey.

Hey, hey, hey… It's alright, it's alright. Elias didn't tell anyone, there was, there was no way you could have known. I-I mean, I wasn't exactly here before.

MARTIN

No, you weren't.

…

But I'm sure that if you could have been, you would have.

…

Are you alright? They didn't hurt you?

ARCHIVIST

No. No, no, I'm… I'm okay. Just – I mean my skin's in better condition than… ever.

Is that a weird thing to say?

MARTIN

A bit?

ARCHIVIST

It was basically all she talked about. Orsinov. I-It was – How's everyone been?

MARTIN

Oh, well, we've, we've been fine. I mean… Well, not great. Tim's still… not doing well. Melanie seems okay, but I get the feeling she's… I don't know, planning something?

ARCHIVIST

I – I got that feeling too.

MARTIN

Basira's the only one doing – well, she seems weirdly calm about the whole thing. Like it's… like she's on a vacation or something.

ARCHIVIST

Maybe she just suits the academic life. What about Daisy?

MARTIN

Don't see her much. Which is fine by me.

[UNCOMFORTABLE SILENCE]

ARCHIVIST

Does the rest of the Institute know what's going on down here? I mean, I never really paid attention, but…

MARTIN

N-Not really? I think? I mean, Tim's been going on about it to anyone who listens, but I think they just… think he's had a bit of a breakdown.

ARCHIVIST

Well, I mean…

MARTIN

I mean, *they* can quit.

Hannah just left to have her baby, though.

ARCHIVIST

I don't know who that is.

MARTIN

Yeah you do – Hannah? She works in the library. Black, kind of stocky. Had that whole thing with the milk in the break room last year?

ARCHIVIST

I, er… Sorry. I really don't…

MARTIN

Well, anyway, I… Well, I think they all just see the Archives as kind of weird and leave us to it. Y'know? Better us than them.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, they're not wrong.

[MORE UNCOMFORTABLE SILENCE]

MARTIN

So… are you coming back or…?

ARCHIVIST

I-I-I-I don't know. Probably not yet. There's a lot of… I-I think I might be on a bit of a treasure hunt.

MARTIN

Oh?

ARCHIVIST

Treasure in the sense of the… the world not ending.

MARTIN

Oh.

ARCHIVIST

I will keep in touch. I'm, I'm going to need all of you digging into stuff.

E-Elias mentioned… he said you'd been… reading statements?

MARTIN

Oh… uh… yeah.

Um… He thought it might help.

ARCHIVIST

Right. I-I-I mean, they're not… They haven't…

You've been okay?

MARTIN

B-B… Yeah. I mean, i-it wasn't *fun,* but… I mean, if it, if it helps then I –

ARCHIVIST

Okay. If you're sure, just… Make sure the others help you, alright? Statements can be… If you're not used to them it can… be a bit weird.

MARTIN

Er… Sure.

ARCHIVIST

An-anyway, I-I-I should go. I-I've got a few leads to follow up.

MARTIN

Right, right.

ARCHIVIST

I'm, I'm sorry, Martin. We haven't… I know we haven't talked much since… Sasha and everything.

MARTIN

Well, I mean it's not too late, y'know. Unless the world ends.

[MARTIN LAUGHS NERVOUSLY]

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[CLICK]

MAG103 - Cruelty Free

Statement #0140207

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Dylan Anderson, regarding an unusual pig he acquired on his farm near the Marlborough Forest, New Zealand. Original statement given July 2nd, 2014. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Pigs are tricky. They are very intelligent animals. But I've found I can never completely bring myself to trust them. They can be your best friend, then tackle your legs from behind if they're feeling mean. And when a pig hits you, you know you've been hit. It doesn't help matters that I am acutely aware that a pig would be more than happy to eat *me* if the opportunity came up. They're true omnivores, and they wouldn't necessarily even do me the courtesy of waiting until I was dead. I've heard more than one grisly story of a farmer passing out drunk in a pigpen, and in the morning there's only bones. I had my cousin, Melinda, visiting a few years back with her son, and I told her to make sure and keep the baby away

from the pigs. I still remember the dawning look of horror on her face when I told her why, like she couldn't believe that a pig would just… eat a baby. But most pigs would. Most pigs will eat just about anything that doesn't stop them.

I feel I may be doing pigs a disservice here, to be honest. When I say a pig can be your best friend, I'm not exaggerating. They can be tremendously affectionate creatures, and I've known more than one pig that I'd put in the running against any of my human friends. But it's hard to get past the idea that if my human friends would draw a cock and balls on my face when I'm sleeping off the drink, my pig friends might just… eat me. They probably wouldn't. 'Cause we're friends. But they might.

It's not even like I run a proper pig farm, I just keep a few at a time, since they're quite handy to have about. A couple of pigs are a great way to dispose of waste, and their manure is great for composting. And, I can't deny, when it's their time, they are… quite tasty. And I do sell the meat, though I take a lot of pains to make sure people know it was raised cruelty free. I take care of them. The point is, I certainly have never had so many pigs that I would lose track. And I know I never bought or birthed the monster pig.

When I first called it that, it was just because it was huge. I never got a chance to properly weigh it, but it must have come in at around three or four hundred kilos. I don't know if you know about pigs, but that's big. Bigger than big. It's a monster pig. I didn't find out about the rest until… well, I didn't know.

I don't know when it came from. I didn't buy it. I didn't take delivery of it, and as far as I can tell, no-one else did either. It's a bit hard to tell as this was back in March, so the Merlot harvest season was well underway. As you've seen, while I do have a few pigs, this is a vineyard. We supply grapes to a lot of the bigger winemakers around here, and I'd been toying with the idea of starting my own label but haven't really done anything with it yet. Oh, uh, when you're writing this up, make it's clear that we're near the Marlborough *Forest,* but that's not the same thing as the Marlborough region, which is famous for wine. That's on the South Island. I just don't want there to be any confusion.

Where was I? Yeah, it was the height of the Merlot harvest, so most of us, myself included, were out in the vineyard for pretty much the whole day. I hadn't checked on the pigs in a while, but the next time I headed into the sty… there it was, sat in the corner, just encompassing the corner, its bulk filling the place out as the other, smaller pigs, tried to find somewhere to be that wasn't next to it. It just sat there, and stared at me. I didn't like staring back at it. It made me feel strange, like it was sorting me into cuts of meat. There was more in those eyes than I'd ever seen in another pig; hidden among the rolls of pink flesh, they had malice in them. The pig wanted to hurt me. I'm sure of that.

I-I didn't know what to do. I just – I asked around to see if anyone knew where it had come from, but no-one had any idea. They were just as baffled as I was. Though they could see it, which was, you know, a relief.

Or not, since it being real meant it had to be fed. Part of me did consider immediately trying to send it for slaughter, but… but something about the way it looked at me, almost daring me to try it, a thin trickle of pink saliva glistening around its mouth. I'm absolutely sure if I'd asked Manawa, or any of the others, to bring it out for that, they would be dead. In fact, the more I think about the whole situation, the more certain I am that the monster pig wanted nothing more than to kill and eat *me*. It just didn't want the hassle of breaking out of the sty. Though I'm sure it could have if it really wanted to.

I tried to feed it, but it was so huge, it ate so much, and there wasn't enough for all the others as well. It wouldn't need to be violent. It would just shift its mass towards the trough, and the other pigs would just be moved aside. When it ate, I got a closer look at that mottled body. It was covered in small lumps and marks that at first I thought might have been ticks or some other sort of parasite. But as I got closer, I saw that they were scars. Shot scars, most of them, with some that looked like they might have been from spikes or axes. One of them… looked like finger marks. As I stared at it, still stood in the pen, my eyes darted again to the gate and the lock that was now looking far too flimsy. It could just leave and – and attack; there was nothing I could do to stop it. I just watched it eat all the food.

Not enough food, apparently, since after a few days of this, it decided to supplement its diet with poor Toby. I'd looked after Toby since he was born. I'd helped birth him. He was my friend. So when

I saw what was left of him lying in the pigpen on that damp Tuesday morning, I'm not ashamed to say that I cried. He was the first of my pigs to go, but I was sure he wouldn't be the last. I tried to get the other pigs out a couple of times, move them to another pen, but the monster would start to shift its weight towards me with alarming speed, and I would always run away like a coward. The only time I seemed to be safe was when I was bringing food.

This went on for months. My brother, Kurt, came for a visit at one point. He said he planned to stay a couple of weeks, but the very first night I was woken up by the sound of movement outside of the farmhouse. I grabbed a torch, popped on my boots, and headed outside. I didn't even consider not checking the pig sty first. Sure enough, as I got close, I heard something, though it wasn't entirely clear what it was. It wasn't the sound of a colossal pig eating my brother though, so that was encouraging. It was him, though, stood there, staring into the darkness. He was muttering something to himself. I think the words were, "Long pig. Short pig. Wide pig. Narrow pig." Over and over. "Long pig. Short pig. Wide pig. Narrow pig." He didn't seem to be entirely conscious, so I was reluctant to wake him. I didn't think it was a nice situation to become aware of all of a sudden. That said, when he reached over and started fumbling with the latch, I quickly changed my mind, and shook him awake. His eyes snapped open properly and immediately focused on something behind me, in the sty. I didn't need to look around or ask him what he was looking at. His pale, stricken face told me plain enough what it was.

To his credit, he managed to stay another three days before he had to return to London on a ‘business emergency’. For context, I’m pretty sure he works as a traffic warden. And still the pig just sat there. Waiting.

I believe it was the circus that got your attention though, wasn’t it? That’s what you were asking about when you turned up. So, the Carley Brothers Circus mostly tours around Australia, but every couple of years they do a New Zealand tour as well. They do a few other spots around the Pacific, but the important point for this story is that this is one of the years they’re doing New Zealand. Now, generally they need anywhere between a couple of weeks and a month of moving things over, setting up, and getting all the right permissions and arrangements in place before the tour begins in earnest. I went to school with the brother of the guy who runs it, so the last couple of years they’ve done this, I rented out one of my larger, unused fields to them for their staging area. It’s pretty easy money, and they don’t need to use my facilities, and tend to be almost entirely self-contained. The first year they did it there was a lot of trash left behind we had had to clean up, but apparently someone bashed the right heads about it, since last year there was barely a cigarette stub left.

So the arrangements are all made, and the Carley Brothers Circus moves onto one of my fields for a month. I get drunk with the ringmaster and a couple of acrobats. So far, so normal. I almost forgot about the monster that lived in my pigpen. Almost.

A few weeks passed without anything happening. Then one of the

clowns disappeared. A man named Angus Dale. He's been a member of the circus for almost ten years now. No drink or drug problems, and no issues with his personal life, nowhere particular else to go. Exactly no reason to up and vanish from his job without telling anyone where he's going. They started a search of the Marlborough Forest, they informed local police, they started discussing the best ways to publicise the disappearance.

I'm sure you can guess where this is going. Through it all there was this dark little suspicion growing in my mind. I never saw any evidence for it, not really. Nothing that would stand up in court, but even so, the suspicion grew into a theory, which grew into a certainty. That pig, that monster still squatted in my sty. The lock hadn't been damaged or left open, so it was hard to see how it could have gotten out to attack a clown, or even how Angus might have gotten in. But I know he did. I **know** that thing killed and ate him.

I keep having this dream. I used to watch the rehearsals for the Carley Brothers' performances, and I can clearly remember Angus Dale's voice, or at least his clowning voice. I was watching him perform, but instead of a comedy skit or a bit of slapstick, he would sink his teeth into his limbs with this crunching, cracking sound, gradually eating himself. But even with a mouth full of meat, his laugh was still clear as a bell, his jokes and pleas for mercy clearly articulated. He never gave any sign he was in pain, but every few seconds he would stop laughing or chewing, and just repeat the words, "Long pig. Short pig. Wide pig. Narrow pig," before starting

up again. When I finally managed to drag myself out of bed the next morning, there was a bright, white, human femur on the ground in the pig sty, lying in front of the enormous fleshy form that just gazed at me in horrid triumph.

I didn't want to tell anyone. That would have brought investigation, the police, efforts to exterminate the man-eating thing that looked so much like a pig. It wouldn't go how they expected, I was sure of that, and I didn't know what to do. Would it kill more people if I just left it alone, or if they tried to kill it? I never had much call for ethics before really, it was just… grapes and pigs. And when faced with that choice, I found myself completely paralysed.

After about ten minutes standing there in silence, staring at that bone, I walked into the pen, and I lay down motionless in front of the monster pig. Thinking now, that decision seems alien to me, but I think I just couldn't stand the thought of going any further in the story that was playing out in front of me. It smelt awful on the floor, and as the pink form began to move towards me, my resolve started to waver. It was far too heavy to be supported by its skinny, twig-like legs, but something still propelled it slowly forward, inch by inch, that familiar pink drool leaving a thin path for the enormous body to follow, until it was right on top of me.

I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth, waiting to feel the pain of it starting to tear into my flesh. But instead, I felt it *settle* next to me, the meat of it sinking into the spaces left by my position. It was pressing up against me, and let out the most contented sound I have ever heard from a pig. The message could not have been clearer:

‘Friend’.

I don’t know how long I lay there in that stinking pig sty, listening to the calm, relaxed breathing of the murderous thing that had chosen to spare me. Eventually it retreated to its corner, and I stood and walked back into the house.

If you hadn’t turned up that evening, I don’t know what I’d have done. I know a monster pig wasn’t what you were looking for, but I do appreciate your advice. When you explained the situation, I hoped you’d have some special trick for dealing with it, but I suppose welding scrap metal around the pen and filling it with cement just about works, even if I do owe Mason a favour for borrowing his mixer. I’d have thought the thing would at least try to break free while I did it, but… thank heaven for small mercies, I suppose.

A huge block of solid concrete. What ought to do with it? Some sort of engraving, maybe? “In memory of Toby”? I can’t very well put it up “In memory of Angus”. That’s what really gets me, to be honest. Those pigs didn’t deserve what that thing did to them. Tearing them apart and eating them. Neither did Angus, of course.

The circus is still around if you want to talk to them, but the search for Angus Dale is still going on, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t bring my name up. Oh, and if you’re hungry, I’ve got some bacon in the freezer I’m going to cook up.

What?

Statement ends.

ARCHIVIST

Another dead end for Gertrude, it seems. Assuming it was Gertrude Mr. Anderson was talking to, but I feel that's a safe assumption, as the tickets to Wellington were only for one. Perhaps Gerard joined her later? I can only imagine her frustration upon chasing down a mysterious disappearance with a circus connection, only to find herself instead trying to help contain an evil pig. Too much meat.

The disappearance of Angus Dale is still an open case though, no leads have been found since a possible reported sighting in 2016 that didn't amount to anything. Martin attempted to make contact with Mr. Anderson himself, but after a few unanswered emails and calls ringing out, I think we can safely abandon that hope.

There is one loose end I'm hoping might amount to something though. Mr. Anderson mentioned his brother, Kurt, emigrated to the UK, and works as a traffic warden. At least, as of 2014. Melanie's seeing if she can hunt him down. If he's still around, there's a possibility he might be able to fill in a few of the… missing pieces. I currently have nothing to indicate where Gertrude might have travelled next, but I… I have a hunch Kurt Anderson might be able to help.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[BUSY STREET NOISES]

ARCHIVIST

Er, excuse me, are you Kurt Anderson?

KURT

Yeah, why?

ARCHIVIST

Dylan Anderson is your… is your brother?

KURT

Yeah… Why is he in some kind of trouble?

ARCHIVIST

Oh no, I-I-I want to… I just have a couple of questions.

KURT

Look buddy, I'm not sure about –

ARCHIVIST

It's about a pig he owned back in 2014.

KURT

Woah. No, I don't know anything about that.

ARCHIVIST

Well, it's kind of a weird one – No, look, I know we haven't met…

KURT

[Insistent] I don't know what you're talking about.

ARCHIVIST

[Sighs] Fine…

What do you know about the pig?

KURT

I only met it once, and it freaked me right out. I haven't been back since. But Dylan says he managed to get rid of it.

ARCHIVIST

Did he mention an old woman who helped him?

KURT

Yeah, but he didn't say how. Told me some weird guy turned up afterwards, and she went off with him in a real hurry. Left heaps of stuff behind and all.

ARCHIVIST

Er, w-w-what, what stuff did she leave behind?

KURT

I don't know, papers, letters, a couple of old plane tickets. Now listen, dude …

ARCHIVIST

No, no, did he say what he did with them?

KURT

He sent them to me, asked me to get them back to her.

ARCHIVIST

A-And did you?

KURT

No, couldn't be bothered. Then I forgot. I've still got them somewhere, I think.

ARCHIVIST

I, um, I, I work with her. Could I … could I collect them?

KURT

No! I don't even know you! Just get away, dude.

Weirdo. Leave me alone.

ARCHIVIST

B-B-B-But those papers are very important.

KURT

Get away from me.

ARCHIVIST

Fine, fine, just…

What's your darkest secret?

KURT

I don't know. Er, sometimes I take little bribes, and not give people a ticket.

[Realises] Oh, what the hell?

ARCHIVIST

Right, okay, I imagine Lambeth Borough Council would be very interested to know that, and I have it on tape. So… let's go get those papers, shall we?

KURT

[Afraid] What are you?!

ARCHIVIST

Let's go.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[TUNNEL SOUNDS; VOICES ECHO]

ARCHIVIST

Thank you for coming.

DAISY

Sure. Why down here?

ARCHIVIST

I, um, E-Elias, I-I think… I think he has a hard time seeing things down here.

DAISY

I.e. he's not watching?

ARCHIVIST

Maybe? I'm, I'm pretty sure it takes him actual effort, so… and it's Wednesday afternoon, when he does his scheduling. So I'm hoping he's distracted.

…

He, er… he loves scheduling.

DAISY

Right.

So, if he's not paying attention, and I kill you down here…

ARCHIVIST

I mean, I wouldn't… I wouldn't risk it.

DAISY

Hm.

ARCHIVIST

Look, I'm… I'm going away for a while. The, the things I'm, I'm looking for they're… they're not in England, not in the UK, I don't think. So I… I just wanted to, to ask, make sure you were going to look after the others.

DAISY

That's my job. Now. Apparently.

ARCHIVIST

I-I-I I don't just mean Basira. E-Elias…

DAISY

I'll keep an eye on them. That all?

ARCHIVIST

No. No. I was, I was… I was thinking. This… Section 31 unit that, that you're a part of –

DAISY

[Insistent] Not a unit! Just paperwork.

ARCHIVIST

Right but, but… what do *they* think about Elias?

DAISY

Best avoided. Pretty harmless. Um, crimes involving the Institute get people sectioned, but he's not an active threat.

ARCHIVIST

If we had evidence that he *was* an active threat, that he was killing people, he, he was the one threatening to make all of your stuff public, do you think they'd move against him?

DAISY

…

Maybe.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, he's got knowledge, but I-I don't know how much that

would help in – What?

DAISY

You sure you want to talk with that *thing* running?

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Um, I-I… I didn't … didn't realise I'd turned it on.

DAISY

Huh. We don't know how he's watching. No evidence.

ARCHIVIST

R-Right.

[CLICK]

MAG104 – Sneak Preview

Statement #0171406

[CLICK]

[CALMING BREATH]

MARTIN

Statement of Eduardo Acosta, regarding the night of October 9th –

[SUDDEN CRASH OF TUMBLING BOXES AND MARTIN EMITS A LITTLE SHRIEK]

TIM

[Unapologetically] Sorry.

[SOUNDS OF BOXES & FILES BEING MOVED AROUND DURING THE CONVERSATION]

MARTIN

Oh Christ, Tim! Oh, I… huh, oh, oh God, it's alright, it's just a shock. I didn't realise you were…

TIM

[Dourly] I've been moving boxes in here for a while.

MARTIN

You… have you?

TIM

Yeah. Everything alright?

MARTIN

Yeah, I guess. I kind of… zone out a bit when I have to read a statement.

TIM

Right.

…

Well, see ya.

MARTIN

Oh no, Tim! Uh, Tim!

TIM

Hmm?

MARTIN

Uh, while I've got you, there's a book I was after for, uh… well, it

was, uh, uh, *The Marvellous Spiritualism and the Circus in the 19th Century?* I asked up in the Library, but Tom said you had it checked out?

TIM

Yeah. Why?

MARTIN

Oh, you know, just looking into anything and everything that might pin down The Unknowing.

TIM

The what?

MARTIN

[Cautiously] The Unknowing?

TIM

Well, am I supposed to know what that is or, or what?

MARTIN

You don't –

Ah, ummm, heh heh, I just thought someone would have *told* you by now.

TIM

Well, they haven't.

[Pointedly] **What** are you talking about?

MARTIN

I mean, I'm not… sure –

TIM

Martin! What **is** The Unknowing? And what does it have to do with the Circus?

MARTIN

It's… it's uh, uh, a ritual. I don't know the… it's, it's bad. Like, like really bad. Like, maybe 'end of the world' bad. And the Circus is doing it, the, the, the Russian ones, the, uh, Circus of the Other.

TIM

[High-strung giggling] No, no, no, no, no. No, we haven't – There hasn't **been** a Circus statement since Leanne Denikin's last year, and **that** was a dead end! There's… *someone* would have told me.

MARTIN

Tim, you've been out of it for a while.

TIM

[Not entirely stable] Someone **should** have told me!

MARTIN

Why?

[DEEP BREATHS FROM TIM]

Tim, are you alright?

TIM

Turn it off.

MARTIN

What?

TIM

[Shouting] Turn it o–

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

MARTIN

Please, Tim.

TIM

No.

MARTIN

He *needs* to hear it.

TIM

I don't care.

MARTIN

He can't help if he doesn't know.

TIM

I don't want his help, Martin.

MARTIN

Elias seems to think that he's the best chance that we have to stop them.

TIM

And what? I'm supposed to just *trust* Elias now?

MARTIN

Please.

TIM

[Exhales] Fine. Fine. I'll tell him in person, when he gets back

from… wherever it is that he's vanished to.

MARTIN

China. And if you try to tell him in person, you'll just end up at each other's throats. You *know* you will.

TIM

…

[Bitterly] Statement of Timothy Stoker, on the disappearance of… of my brother, Danny, four years ago. June 14th, 2017.

MARTIN

Thank you.

TIM

Statement begins.

TIM (STATEMENT)

My little brother Danny, he was always better than me. He was a couple of years younger, but by the time he hit 21 he was already taller, fitter, better looking. I mean, he didn't have my winning sense of humour, but he didn't need it. Charisma, it wasn't a problem for him. I think a lot of people in my situation would have been… jealous, but not me. I was just proud of him. He was always doing some, some charity race or endurance course, getting modelling gigs, while I worked quietly away in publishing. And it

made me smile.

I remember, he actually got a job doing some publicity shots for the company that owned my local gym. There was a good five months where, whenever I walked down to my offices, there he'd be, twice as large as life, smiling down from a poster, and challenging me to take them up on their joining fee, or lack thereof. I never did, but it always brought a smile to my face when I saw it.

We didn't really talk much, me and Danny. We were still pretty close, and he'd usually keep me updated on whatever his latest obsession was. He tended to throw himself into a thing completely for about six months, and well, then he'd get bored, and something new would catch his eye. Like, um, back in 2013, it was urban exploration. He'd come down to London, stay with me for a couple of day's and we'd end up having drinks with, er, Abigail Ellison, who's a mutual friend of ours from back home.

Abi had been doing the urban exploration thing on and off for a few years, and was telling us a few of her 'close calls' in some of the sites down near the old Docklands. As she talked, I was just watching Danny's eyes light up, and I knew exactly what was happening. His passion for sailing was starting to wane after almost a year, and I was sure I was watching him discover his next project. When Abi mentioned she had a trip lined up for the old Millennium Mills in Newham, well, it was pretty much a done deal. At the time I quite liked the idea. It wasn't the *weirdest* thing to ever catch Danny's attention, not by a long shot, and secretly I thought he and Abigail would maybe make kind of a cute couple, so I was quite

encouraging. Not that he needed it.

It's weird, isn't it, the things that can change your life? You can plan for all the devastating, terrible possibilities you can imagine, and it'll always be those tiny, *unexpected* things that get you. You know, the things that you never even noticed as they were happening, just… just nudging *everything* into motion. But even if there was a way I could have known, I really don't think I'd be able to have stopped him.

So, for the next few months that was it. My cool little brother was an urban explorer. It suited him, and I got used to my phone buzzing at my office desk as he filled it with pictures of his smiling face in front of some, I don't know, rusted machine or hidden tunnel. He never did get together with Abi, but it only took a couple of trips with her, and he'd learned what he needed. He talked a few of his friends into it, like always, started going on trips further afield. I thought he'd be down in London more than he was, but it turns out there are even more interesting abandoned places up north, and they tend to be less guarded than they are down here, so that was where he spent most of his time.

There was one thing that did draw him down to London, though – what he referred to as "ghost buildings". There might have been some official name in the urban exploration community, I don't know; he stopped using the jargon around me after I joked that 'urbex' sounded like a brand of drain cleaner. What he was talking about was the places where newer buildings had been constructed in or, I don't know, over the remains of an earlier one, but

development had left some of the old pieces intact. Sometimes, it was just a wall or two, made out of a different material, but occasionally there'd be an entire hidden basement or bricked up room. I don't know why, but Danny loved them. He'd talk for hours about "crumbling pieces of history desperately clinging onto existence", but to be honest I never really got it. I guess I didn't have to. Anyway, according to him, London had more of these 'ghost buildings' than anywhere else in the country.

He'd been exploring for a few months when he first mentioned Covent Garden Theatre. It had been destroyed by fire twice since it was first built in 1732, and well, he was convinced that the current building stood on top of floors and floors of hidden and abandoned ruins, "the discarded cocoons of its previous life" as he once put it. He showed me maps and measurements, a few photo sets from others who'd apparently been there before. I never asked him to, but well, when he was excited, he just wanted everyone else to share it. That was… that was Danny. He was just… like that. While he was talking about the second Theatre Royal in Covent Garden, the one that lasted less than fifty years before it burned down, that was when I first heard the name Robert Smirke.

All through this, I was trying to talk him out of going because, well, what had *once* been the Covent Garden Theatre is nowadays known as the Royal Opera House, which is about as far from an abandoned building as you can get. And I really didn't think that trespassing there would be a good idea. But Danny didn't want to hear it. He wasn't going into the main building, he told me, and had figured

out a route he claimed would lead him into the abandoned levels below without crossing anywhere that might actually attract security. And he was going alone, so he didn't need to worry about attracting too much attention. I told him it was a bad idea, but I'd never been able to stand in the way of his confidence. So late on Wednesday night in August 2013, my little brother went to break into the ruins hidden under the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. It sounds so ridiculous to say it out loud, but there it is.

I don't know how long he was gone. I went to bed around one in the morning, and he hadn't gotten back. It was a hot night, and I woke up a few hours later needing a glass of water. There were the first hints of dawn filtering in through my living room windows, giving it this quiet, otherworldly feeling. Danny was sat in my big armchair, completely still. I smiled, feeling suddenly a little bit unsettled, and trying my best to hide it. I'd asked how it had been, but he didn't answer. I asked him if he'd found anything, and he nodded slowly. I saw as he tilted his head that his cheeks were just wet with tears. He mumbled something then, very quietly, and I couldn't really make it out, but it sounded like the name 'Joey'.

It was all kind of surreal, strange, and I started to think I might be dreaming, but I'd never seen him cry before. I tried to talk to him, find out what was wrong, but he just kept shaking his head. We sat there in silence for a *long* time. I didn't know what to do; the whole situation was so alien. I thought maybe I could try and get him some rest, let him collect himself, so after some coaxing, I got him onto the couch. As he laid down, I heard him say something else. I

thought it sounded like “the show must go on”, and at that moment, you know, I actually thought that was a good sign. I watched for a few more minutes until he was asleep, and then I went back to bed, though it was a while before I fell back to sleep.

That night was the last time I ever saw Danny. When I woke up a few hours later, he was gone. He left no note, no hint of where he may have gone, and the only thing that showed he’d been back at all were a small pile of sketches he’d drawn on some scrap paper from my printer. On each there was a clown, the same clown. A shock of dark hair, vertical on the top of his head, porcelain white face, bright red lips painted in a wide, pointed smile, and a crimson diamond running down each cheek from just below his eyes. The lips may have been smiling, but the mouth my brother had drawn was dark, an empty circle that made me feel cold.

I should have called the police. Well, maybe not, now I’ve met some of the ones who’ve dealt with these cases. But I shouldn’t have followed him. I shouldn’t have checked the notes Danny left about where to get in, and what to watch out for en route. There was never really any hope for me, though, was there? This was how it was always going to go.

Danny’s notes were very comprehensive, and finding the entrance to the old, disused part under the Royal Opera House wasn’t nearly as difficult as I thought it might be. He hadn’t reattached the chain he’d broken to get in, and it didn’t look like anyone had noticed to replace it. The entrance stood open, and even though it was the middle of the day, it became almost completely dark as soon as it

crossed the threshold. I think he must have done some work on the hinges too, because even though I could see the rust eating through them, the door opened in complete silence. I stepped inside.

Back then I didn't know enough about Robert Smirke's architecture to recognise his work; I just thought it was a really well-preserved sub-level. The corridors were wide and solid, and my torch showed columns that were that regular geometry that I've come to recognise. Compared to the summer heat outside, the air was cold. I found myself shivering in just my T-shirt and shorts. The whole place looked spotless, a lot cleaner than any pictures I've ever seen of urban exploration or abandoned sites. I couldn't really see why the Royal Opera House above wouldn't use this space, why they'd just let it sit here untouched and hidden behind a locked and unmarked steel door just off of James Street. I was still wondering about this when I walked into the auditorium.

At the time I wasn't exactly sure what I was looking at, but I've now seen pictures of the second Theatre Royal in Covent Garden, the one designed by Smirke, and I can say it was identical. A perfect recreation of the old stage and tiered seats, the decorations and the boxes. There were only two differences: that it was almost twenty feet below the ground where the original stage was, and that everything, from the floor, to the seats, to the blank and faceless audience was *entirely* hewn out of crude stone. There was no light except for the headlamp I had taken from my brother's pack, and it swept over a full house, four levels of unmoving stone watchers, two thumb-sized indentations focused towards the stage. There was

nothing that indicated they were any newer than the rest of the place.

I walked down the steps to the edge of the top level, where I'd entered, and I looked down towards the stage. My lamp barely illuminated the single figure that stood on it. *[Deep exhalation]* It was Danny. At least, I, I think it was. It looked like him; the same hair, the same clothes, but there was something not right about how he looked. Like he was smaller, somehow, slightly folded in on himself. It didn't matter; I shouted down to him, to let him know I was there. He didn't look up, but when my voice echoed around the stone theatre, I knew I'd made a horrible mistake.

From somewhere above me, a spotlight suddenly turned on, shining down onto the stage, painfully bright against the white stone. The air became uncomfortably hot, and there was some sort of music. The spotlight wasn't on Danny. Instead, it picked out a figure crouched in the corner. All ruffles, and polka dots, and tights. A clown. It crouched and contorted in the corner, hands backwards over its face, but not so much that I couldn't see the dark red patterns that seemed to flow down its eyes. I couldn't move.

Slowly, so slowly, its right arm reached out towards Danny. It placed its hand on the floor with a long, low groan, then pulled itself along the floor, the fabric of its colourful dress scraping the rough stone of the stage, and its cheek rubbing against the ground, leaving a trail of red behind it. Then it was still for a second, before a leg reached out in front, and it began to drag the rest of the clown behind it.

I always tell myself there was some force there. Something that held me in place and meant that all I could do was watch. But sometimes when I think back, I remember how my legs shook, and maybe I could move. Maybe I'm just a coward.

The clown reached my brother, who still hadn't moved an inch, and unfurled to its full height. The red on the cheeks was now clearly blood, and something black oozed down from its shock of hair. It took Danny by the hand and looked up, right at me, smiling like nothing has ever smiled since. "Shall I?" he asked, with a voice so full of playful mischief that I felt bile rise in my throat. I wanted to shake my head, say no, but I never got a chance.

With a single, smooth motion, like whipping the tablecloth off in a restaurant, he pulled the skin off of whatever had been pretending it was my brother. I don't know how to describe it. It was like an impressionist painting of a dancer, all colours and shapes that made you feel movement you couldn't see. Silently, imperceptibly, moving from one position to another. The music had stopped and the dance was silent. It was beautiful.

The next thing I remember was the cool night air on my face, as the opera house patrons pushed past me to get into the evening performance of *Tosca.* In my hands I held an old black and white circus flyer. It was written all over in Cyrillic, but in the bottom left corner was a certain clown's face, leering out at me, billed as the guest performer. As I watched, it crumbled to ash, and floated away on the breeze.

MARTIN

That was the last time you ever saw your brother?

TIM

Yeah.

MARTIN

You never went back?

TIM

To the auditorium? No. If I had, I… I don't think they'd let me leave a second time.

MARTIN

That's why you joined the Institute, isn't it?

TIM

I thought I might be able to find something about what happened, but… I guess at some point I stopped seriously looking, and started to just… get comfortable.

MARTIN

Until John…

TIM

Until the Archives, yeah.

MARTIN

…

Tim, the, the clown that you described is –

TIM

Yeah, I know. It didn't take too much looking around to match the description of Victorian London's most famous clown

[MARTIN SIGHS]

Joseph Grimaldi. A Covent Garden theatre regular.

MARTIN

I mean, 200 years *is* a long time, but…

TIM

Yeah, it's him, though. Or it looks like him. Or his ghost or something. I don't know why, but… I think he's with the Russian circus.

MARTIN

Yeah.

TIM

You're reckon they're trying to what, end the world?

MARTIN

I mean maybe it's not… yeah, I think so.

TIM

And no one told me.

MARTIN

You were never here to tell, Tim.

TIM

Well, I am now! I don't care about the rest of it, if anyone's going to find that Circus, **I'm** coming too. **You're** not going to stop me!

MARTIN

I mean, sure, sure, I think that's actually a good i–

[THE DOOR OPENS]

ELIAS

Knock, knock.

TIM

[Sighs] Great.

MARTIN

Oh.

ELIAS

Martin, would you give us a moment?

MARTIN

I… uh…

ELIAS

Please.

MARTIN

Uh, right, um, s-sorry, Tim.

[THE DOOR CLOSES]

TIM

You were watching, then?

ELIAS

Most of it.

TIM

Surprised you didn't know it already. That's your *thing,* isn't it?

ELIAS

I knew there was *some* trauma that drew you to us, but I can't say I ever thought to look much deeper. An oversight, perhaps, but I'm looking now.

TIM

All right, hit me with your X-ray eyes then, boss. What do you see?

ELIAS

Disruption. An unpredictable, angry man with nothing left but the desire to feel in some way revenged.

TIM

[Sarcastic] Ooh, terrifying! Surely only magic could have let you see so deep inside my very soul.

ELIAS

Tim, I'm only going to tell you this once. Please stay away from The Unknowing, the Circus, all of it. I don't believe you can help, and I don't know what will happen if you get involved.

TIM

Oh sure. I'll just forget about it. Go back to sulking in a corner.

ELIAS

Tim.

TIM

Don’t worry about me, boss, I’ll just stop. It’s what I’m best at, right? Don’t want to get in the way of your evil plans, do I?

ELIAS

I mean it, Tim.

TIM

[Incensed] Oh, oh, you **mean** it? Oh well, that’s different. Okay, well, let me tell you what. If you want me to ignore everything that’s going on, forget my brother and **everything** that’s happened over the last two years, how about you kill me?

ELIAS

…

I don’t want it to come to that.

TIM

Well, me either. But here we are. So my proposal for you is this: either kill me or fuck off.

ELIAS

…

I’ll come back when you’re feeling more… reasonable.

TIM

Then I guess I'll see you in hell.

[ELIAS LEAVES]

[Upon noticing the tape recorder] Oh, piss off.

[CLICK]

MAG105 – Total War

Statement #D-1862-143

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

You're sure you don't mind?

XIAOLING

Of course not. Recording is what we are here for.

ARCHIVIST

And this is the same statement that Gertrude checked out?

XIAOLING

I will check again with my assistant, but it's the only one we have from 太平天国运动 [1] written in English.

ARCHIVIST

The Taiping Rebellion? I assumed it would be about a circus or, uh…?

XIAOLING

I have not read it, but I would be surprised. I seriously doubt there

were any circuses at the time. I believe it was like a, um, 见鬼 [2].

ARCHIVIST

[Snorts] I-isn't all war like a nightmare?

XIAOLING

Oh, 你说中文 [3]?

ARCHIVIST

I, I don't, why?

XIAOLING

…

How long did you say you have been Archivist?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, about two years now.

XIAOLING

Well, Elias made a good choice. I did offer him someone, but he thought the language might be too much for him.

ARCHIVIST

Huh.

XIAOLING

我相信没关系是不是. 4

ARCHIVIST

I-I suppose not.

XIAOLING

Anyway, I will leave you to your work. Let me know if you need anything.

ARCHIVIST

I will. Thank you.

XIAOLING

没关系. 5

[XIAOLING LEAVES]

[DEEP SIGH]

ARCHIVIST

The details I got from Gertrude's documents lead me to believe that, before she made her way to New Zealand, she paid a visit here, to the Pu Songling Research Centre, Beijing. The centre is something of a sister organisation to the Institute, and while that means I have some… reservations about their motives, it does mean gaining access to their collection is relatively simple. According to Zhang

Xiaoling, the librarian here, this statement was the one that Gertrude checked out during her last visit. So…

Statement of Second Lieutenant Charles Fleming, regarding his experiences during the Taiping Rebellion. Original statement undated, but apparently written in early 1862. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Yellow reeds and white bones. Yellow reeds and white bones. I hear it said so often now it almost has the rhythm of a joke. How can one have poetic clichés for a massacre? How can unspeakable carnage become so tired and repetitive? Even the most trite and poorly written of the penny bloods would, at least, make some show of a plot, or a purpose to the horror and the suffering. But here, beyond those pages, it seems the dead simply pile higher and higher on both sides, and nothing changes but the number of ghosts. On one side atrocities in the name of one who claims to be brother of Christ; on the other, slaughter in the name of the supposedly sane men who would stop him and his Heavenly Kingdom. And I find myself walking through the still and bloody landscape that has consumed all of China, scrawling my confessions on any paper I can find not yet saturated by mud and death. I am a stranger here, yet if you told me I were dead, and this place my just reward, I would not for one second doubt your honesty. I have seen no vision of hell that can compare.

Neither could I say I have not earned it. Not for nothing do these drowned and murdered faces pursue me. *Nemesis* was my ship, under Captain William Hall. I was so eager to serve my country, how could I question what they asked us to do? The trade in opium was a cornerstone of the Empire, and when called upon to defend it against those Chinese that would threaten Britain's rule of the waves, what could I do but answer? Was ever a man so eager to have his country beseech of him his violence?

And there was violence aplenty aboard *Nemesis.* First of its kind. An iron warship. Small, lightly armed, but able to go where other British vessels never dared, far upriver to strike at the very heart of the Qing forces, where their defences were weakest, and the damage we could inflict most brutal. Captain Hall had a particular zeal for the work. He was a petty man, bitter, and never missing an opportunity to mention how long he had waited to command a ship of his own. Were I to judge solely based on the orders he gave, I would have been forced to conclude it was the Chinese who had slighted him, and now he exacted his vengeance. Truth be told, I simply believe he was possessed of a great cruelty. A cruelty I shared.

I remember we sank a Qing ship off First Bar Island. *Cambridge*, it was named, an old East Indiaman sold to the Chinese some years before. When she sank, a few crew made it aboard *Nemesis,* half-dead and utterly defeated. I cannot honestly recall whether Captain Hall ordered them drowned or whether I took it upon myself, confident in the Captain's approval. Either way, it was certainly

forthcoming. Theirs were the first faces that began to follow me. I would never have admitted *that* was why I paled when I passed by a looking-glass. Or why I shook my bunkmates awake, demanding that they stop singing.

Truth be told, no one knows how *Nemesis* sank. I certainly have my own beliefs, my own dreams of what may have reached up towards us and taken its price, dragging that dreadful iron curse to the bottom of the Canton River. All I remember is waking up to the screaming of buckling metal, the louder screaming of doomed men in the decks below, and that third, deeper set of screams, that sounded for all the world like a cry of triumph. I managed to get to the deck, and leap from the bow into the waters of the river. When I plunged below the surface and watched the hulk of *Nemesis*, twisted, and disappearing into the deep, deeper than the Canton River should have been, I saw the water around me full of corpses, but when I finally broke the surface, I was alone.

These corpses follow me still, though I am hard-pressed to see them now, surrounded as I am by death in all its myriad forms. If you ever wish to escape your pursuing guilt, there are few places so apt to hide it as a land devastated by unimaginable war. At least I shall not go hungry. I lost that particular moral qualm in Anqing. I believe thirty-eight fen was the going price for a pound of human meat by the end of the siege. Such a profound will to survive. In the end, it did no good. Zeng Guofan's army breached the gates, and they put everyone inside to death. Sixteen thousand more corpses, soldier and civilian alike. There's no difference anymore. Hide your

hair braid beneath your hat, proclaim your allegiance until you have no breath left, compared to the danger of enemy spies or saboteurs, one more cadaver is nothing.

I'm lucky I still had my British uniform. Almost twenty years lost and abandoned in this country, a prisoner of the very opium I helped to force upon its people; I barely recognised myself putting it on. I'm lucky I never thought to sell it. It was an old design, a long way from the uniforms I see among my old comrades today, but it served well enough to get me through the Qing forces as they stormed through the streets. I am lucky, I suppose, that the only ghosts that chose to follow me were the ones I had to kill as I fled the city. I know there are others that see those behind me, and sixteen thousand lonely souls would be too much for them, I'm sure. They would be too much for me, but I'm not sure what that means anymore.

After the fall of Anqing, I wandered this desolate country, though for how long I do not know. Days went by with not a single living creature to be seen, and only the dead for company. Yellow reeds and white bones. It struck me then how few of the fallen had died by the hand of another. War kills just as surely with hunger and sickness, and for every one bloodied and murdered, there were ten wasted to nothing or black with disease and rot. I suppose there must have been a terrible smell, but there is nowhere here the wind does not chase me with that scent, and I can no longer tell the stench of decay from the air itself. They are one and the same.

Some months ago, I was captured. Not by the Taiping or the

Imperial forces, at least they weren't anymore. I believe they were once peasants, they had clearly never owned the building in which they kept me. There were three of them; one tall, who clearly spoke for his companions, one walking with a noticeable limp and an eye that refused to stop watering, and a third, whose right arm was so discoloured from a spreading infection, that he looked at me with a mixture of hate and helpless terror, as though I could do something to fix it. I did not fight when they barred my way with crude weapons levelled, and demanded my surrender. I have not fought since I left Anqing, and saw the true scale of the devastation.

Believing me to still be a British officer, they intended, it seemed, to ransom me; but they knew of no British forces in the area, so were arguing as to whether to offer me to the Qing army or the nearest rebels. The tall one was adamant that the Imperial Army, now allied with the British, would pay them for my safe return, while the limping man was horrified at the thought. He had cut off his braid, he kept saying, and they would think he was loyal to the Taiping. The third man just watched me, listening to his companions arguing, and laughing softly whenever they mentioned money. I believe that he was the only one who truly understood. When the dead that follow caught up with me, they broke those poor fools apart like twigs, and dragged all three of them below the ground. And they were gone. I found water among their possessions and a small bag of rotten rice, and relishing the chance to wash the taste of blood from my mouth, I ate. I could still hear my would-be captors' voices, and I wondered how long it would be that I still had to wait for death.

Some choose not to wait, of course. I passed by the city of Hangzhou after it had fallen to the Taiping. The gate still stood open, as they were unable to close it for the dead. When the city was taken, the people had rushed out and thrown themselves bodily into the West Lake. It was solid with them. For three hundred yards you could have walked along their still bodies into the middle of the waters. I did, hoping against all hope that an arm might reach out and finally pull me down into that great mass of quiet death. But the waters of the lake were still and dark, and as I left, some who lay upon it rose to join me.

I have no idea where to go now. I have walked so long my feet are bleeding, and I see nothing upon the horizon but more slaughter. More days without the living. So I write this, that some small record of what I have done and what I have seen may continue on. I sit here upon the steps of a Manifest Loyalty Shrine, a small provincial one, erected by a local governor who wished to cement his power now the more central shines can no longer keep up with the number of the dead. But this one is mine. I look at the names of the fallen engraved on the walls, the long and storied lists, and I know that each name is borne by one of those that follow me. It is the list of those that wait for me at the bottom of these steps, though whether they wait to follow me further or to finally descend upon me, I do not know. But my name will never be carved upon this stone. Though war and death have found me in this land, I have no place here. I came for no cause but violence and greed, and have been humbled by the unimaginable brutality of true and total war. I have nothing left, except to hope that what remains of my own life

is neither long nor memorable.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Good Lord. I had heard that the Taiping Rebellion was… but that… I wonder how much of what Lieutenant Fleming says is true and how much is, uh… I almost hope it's all supernatural. Some hideous hallucination or otherworldly hellscape. Part of me really doesn't want to look it up.

It looks like Xiaoling was right though. No Circus. Nothing even that resembles the working of The Stranger. It… it seems to be purely war and violence, whatever power that might be. So why did Gertrude want it? I feel like… I've chased dead end to dead end until I finally give up. I-I mean, what am I actually looking for? Gerard Keay, after he faked his death? Some long confession he left tucked away in a library somewhere, telling me the ancient chant I need to stop the Unknowing from coming to pass?

[Sigh] Maybe this is pointless. I should head home, help the others in their research. If I knew Mandarin or Cantonese, maybe I could look here for more answers, but as it is these files…

Hang on, I think… I think this says 2004. Yes, 1992… 1997… 2004. If I'm reading this right, this file hasn't been accessed for… wait. Ohhhh…

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

So it's been a waste of time then, has it?

XIAOLING

It was a very simple mistake. She did read that statement.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, in 2004, yes, but I-I need information about her visit three years ago. Did, did your assistant find anything about that?

XIAOLING

Yes. There were two accounts that Gertrude took out in 2014.

ARCHIVIST

A-and can I read them?

XIAOLING

According to our records, we don't have them anymore.

ARCHIVIST

[Sigh] Well, Wh-what happened to them? Where **are** they?

XIAOLING

Apparently, they were sent on at the request of the Magnus Institute.

ARCHIVIST

Gertrude asked for them t-to, to be sent to her?

XIAOLING

I believe so.

ARCHIVIST

To the Institute or…?

XIAOLING

No, we have other channels of delivery for that.

ARCHIVIST

Then where?

XIAOLING

I believe it was an American destination.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Oh, would you still have a-a copy of the address?

XIAOLING

I think we do.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you, Xiaoling.

XIAOLING

Not a problem, 建筑师. 6

[CLICK]

1. “Tàipíngtiānguó yùndòng” or “Taiping Heavenly Kingdom”, Chinese ‘state’ from 1851-64 that staged a rebellion to overthrow the Qing Dynasty. ↩

2. “Jiànguǐ” or, literally, “Hell” or “hellscape”. ↩

3. “Nǐ shuō zhōngwén” or “you speak Chinese”. ↩

4. “Wǒ xiāngxìn méiguānxì shì bùshì” or, literally, “I believe it doesn’t matter, if it is not [too much/a problem]”. ↩

5. “Méiguānxì” or “It’s okay / That’s nothing”. ↩

6. “Jiànzhú shī” or, literally, “Architect”, used here as best translation for Archivist. ↩

MAG106 – A Matter Of Perspective

Statement #0081002

[CLICK]

MELANIE

Jan Kilbride's account of his time spent aboard the space station, uh, *Daedalus.* Statement date February 10, 2008. Melanie King recording.

Start.

[CLAP]

MELANIE (STATEMENT)

The hardest thing to imagine, to really get your head around, is, is the scale at which the universe operates. You can drill down so small that you reach particles and building blocks that your brain simply can't connect to. The physical reality that you inhabit, the fact that the vast majority of your own body is empty vacuum space, filled only with the weak forces that are binding you disparate atoms to one another – that can only really be understood on an intellectual level. To really internalize that thought, to

believe it, would be too much for most people.

And the other end – the sheer size at which the universe operates – literally cannot be fully conceptualized by the human mind. We have to reduce it to factors, or long strings of comparative zeros. Most people can't even properly appreciate the size of our own planet, seeing only in crudely-rendered diagrams or maps. But compared to us, the planet is immense. More than large enough for the swell of humanity to grow, and ultimately extinguish itself.

Yet compared to the wider universe, it isn't even a noticeable speck. The human mind would reflexively want a place at the midway point, a perfect center balanced between the incredible size of the universe and the unthinkable smallness of the subatomic. But this is nothing but ego – a manifestation of our obsession with considering us some sort of a normative benchmark against which all else is measured. In truth, we are so much closer to the tiny, mindless atoms that make up our bodies than we are to a universe so enormous that fully imagining it is simply impossible.

Even with all I've seen, I still can't communicate it. I can't make people actually understand how horridly, nauseatingly boundless this universe is, and when I think of it too deeply, I feel like I'm going to throw up. Like a sort of existential vertigo.

It never used to scare me like this. I used to take a sort of comfort in it, in the thought that we were so small, such a minor blip in the life of the universe. Where others saw insignificance and pointlessness, I found freedom. A sort of optimistic nihilism, I

suppose.

I know now it was all just denial, of course. It's not easy to be scared of something that you can't even think about. I miss those days: smoking out the window of a tower block, looking out over the lights of the city blinking up in defiance of the void, and thinking how daft it was. Like an ant shaking its fist at a god.

I think that's really why I wanted to go to space – to put it all in perspective. That for one moment, I could look down and see it all, every human that ever existed, the living and the dead, hanging below me on a tiny ball of carbon.

And you know what? It was worth it. At least, I thought so at the time. That moment, that first look at the earth falling away below us, it was everything I dreamed it would be. And how often is that true? The Daedalus was in low enough orbit that I never got the whole planet in view, as I had hoped. But it didn't matter. The first time, looking down and taking in the sheer scale of it, remains the most magnificent sensation I have ever experienced.

I don't know how they picked me for the mission. A representative of some private consortium approached me about a year beforehand. I'd put in my application a few times, but I, I never really expected anything. I had all the skills, but I knew I wasn't anyone's first choice of astronaut. I simply wasn't exceptional enough.

Also, I thought… Mr. Fairchild didn't mention exactly why I was

chosen, though he did reference my psychiatric profile a few times in the interview. I didn't want to press him too hard on the reasoning in, in case I somehow lost the opportunity. Idiot.

There were technically three of us up there, although I only really spent any time with Manuela. The other one who came up with us – Chilcott, I think his name was – he was apparently doing some sort of separate isolation study. Can't say I envied him. The door to his section of the station was daunting, to say the least. I mean, I'm an engineer, and honestly it looked like it was sturdier than the actual hull.

Manuela and I were instructed not to attempt any communication with him, and to be honest, that was fine by me. On those occasions we had to call in to his little chamber through the intercom, usually as part of maintenance or a systems check, he always sounded so distant. This flat, tinny monotone that set my teeth on edge, like a subtle vibration.

So we left him to it. We had plenty of our own work to do, anyway. Manuela Dominguez was quite a big name in certain areas of the physics community – or, at least, she had been. I hadn't heard of any work she'd done for a good few years. And, as I say, I'm more on the engineering side of things, so it wasn't really something I kept up with in detail.

While she was happy to talk, Manuela apparently didn't like to discuss her professional life on Earth, or the specifics of the research she was doing on the Daedalus. Like Chilcott, her research was kept

entirely separate from mine. And while we spent plenty of time together, I never did figure out exactly what it was. Something to do with lasers, I think.

As for my job, to be honest, it felt disappointingly like busy work. Stress-testing, zero gravity effects, material evaluations – for every test I was told to do, I could have listed a half dozen studies citing similar research from the ISS, most of which had had pretty conclusive results. If you had told me I was just being instructed to do the same things they did over there, but two years later, I'd have been hard-pressed to argue.

But there was something else. A different sort of worry that was building up inside me. It was like a gradual increase of air pressure: you never notice it happening until your ears pop. I didn't realize how intense the sensation had gotten until, all at once, I knew what it was – what I was feeling.

It was the sense of a presence, of there being something out there. Something that wasn't the earth. And it was getting closer.

When it started, I tried to talk to Manuela about it, but she seemed to think I was talking about aliens and quickly changed the subject. I suppose, in a way, I was, but nothing like she was imagining. "Alien" might be the best word for that presence, but not because we were sat on the edge of outer space. Because what it made me feel was beyond anything I had words for.

And still it grew closer. When this thing, this being finally called

out, I didn't just hear it. I felt it, vibrating through me with such a shuddering intensity that I was sure my bones would break into powder inside my skin.

The whole station shook violently, rattling and pitching. My first instinct was to check that the Earth was still below us, and not the victim of some dreadful cosmic disaster. But when I reached the window, it still hung there, serene below us.

As I looked, I saw drops of red floating through the air in front of me. I reached up to my ears, and my hand came away wet. Don't try to tell me sound can't travel in a vacuum, I know. I pushed off towards my quarters and the medical kit, but as I began to move through the station, I stopped. I didn't grab or hit anything, I did nothing to slow my momentum, I just stopped. Floating there motionless, feeling like the whole of existence was frozen in place.

Then slowly, carefully, I went to grab one of the handles, to pull myself out of this zero-gravity limbo. But I couldn't reach. The station was cramped, so cramped that I could only fully stretch out in the section used to exercise, but now, somehow, in this tiny corridor, I couldn't reach the walls. I flailed and I grabbed and I shouted, but somehow, it was all just too far away.

And I knew all at once that I would float there motionless until I died, and I saw the pointless illusion of the station – of the planet below – all hiding me from the uncaring expanse of the universe, in which I was now eternally trapped. The station was a hollow pretense of a shell that did nothing to separate me from the void.

And that cry came again, so loud and long and deep that it couldn't not be the sound of a living thing, so vast and so ancient that thinking about it made me weep. And I screamed in turn.

My hands touched the rail at the exact moment that Manuela came to check on me. I was moving again. She asked if I was alright, though she clearly had no interest in the answer. She said she'd felt the station shake, but when I pressed, she claimed she hadn't heard anything. Her eyes were red, and I noticed for the first time that the tips of her fingers were burned. I don't know why I asked her, really. I knew then that she hadn't heard it, that she would never hear it. And I felt completely alone. I remember I almost envied Chilcott, because at least he had known what he was signing up for.

The next month passed more normally, I think – though beyond a certain point, at the edge of everything you've ever known, the word "normal" loses its meaning. Manuela became more and more withdrawn, more focused on her own research, whatever it might have been, while I more or less stopped doing mine entirely. I got no new instructions. I would find myself staring out into space for a few minutes, and then when I checked the time hours would have passed. I don't remember if I slept.

I honestly can't remember if going out to work on the solar panels was repair work, or if I'd finally been given a new task that required going outside. I just remember sealing the bulky EVA suit and stepping into the airlock, pushing myself out, into the nothing.

The tether coiled out behind me, spooling meter after meter after

meter… but I wasn't going towards the solar panels. Why? Where was I going? I floated slowly off into the empty unending space, and the tether line just kept on going.

The station drifted further and further away. I could feel myself falling up, falling out, falling off of everything that could be called a world. The station was gone, as was the planet of my birth – everything that gave me my existence. It shrank as I watched, until it became less than the smallest dot.

I couldn't have been that far away. It's impossible. But I was. I was so far from all existence, surrounded by the vacuum of everything. I could feel my soul trying to expand, to fill never-ending absence. And it hurt.

I don't know how long I was floating for. I know it was less than a billion years, which is barely a heartbeat in the life of the universe, so how can it really be said to matter?

The stars began to wink out, one by one, and I thought – perhaps for a second, perhaps for a hundred years – that I had reached the end of time, and I was watching the gradual fading of the universe. And then I realized the obvious: I could not see the stars because something was blocking them.

It moved and flowed across my vision. Every motion seemed to snuff out more light. There was no shape to see, no outline that could be drawn of this thing, so dark and enormous I could feel my stomach trying to vomit, my mind trying to expand, to take in the

size of what moved between the stars, filling my entire vision and more.

I knew that if it chose to cry out, it would have destroyed me utterly. And I know that there was no possibility it could ever have noticed I existed.

I do not believe in God. I can't believe that a being with such limitless power and knowledge would still notice humanity, would understand or care about its existence.

But I keep thinking back to an old professor of mine, back when I briefly studied neuroscience. Talking about consciousness, about how we still don't honestly know what it is, where it comes from, what aspect of the brain makes it possible. And I wonder if there might not be consciousnesses out there so far beyond our comprehension that we could not properly recognize them as such. Minds so strange and colossal that we would never know they were minds at all. Perhaps, out there in the endless vast, they would not notice or recognize us in return.

And I wish that I could convince myself that ignorance was the same thing as safety. But then, how many weeds have you unthinkingly stepped on in your lifetime?

MELANIE

Statement ends.

Oh! That… um, well, that seems… that seems to be… that's all of

it? Hmm.

Well, Jan Kilbride definitely returned to Earth with his colleagues, and he certainly seems to have given this statement in person, so… I mean, he did come back somehow. Assuming he ever left. It might have been a hallucination of some sort. Isolation and stress can do odd things to you, of course. *[heh]* Not to mention the evident insomnia.

And if it is true – if what Jan Kilbride saw was real, I mean… to be honest, it sounds a bit beyond my paygrade. *[heh]* Whatever my paygrade is. And I have enough insomnia of my own to deal with.

I did do some checking on the *Daedalus* – I mean, you've got to do something, haven't you? Mr. Kilbride seems to have the right of it, in terms of his job. There have been exactly zero peer-reviewed pieces of research that have in any way referenced or cited studies or tests conducted on the Daedalus. From the point of view of the scientific community, the project might as well have never happened.

Also, I um, I can't find Jan Kilbride. He definitely returned. I found more than one photograph of the trio's arrival back on Earth: Carter Chilcott being attended by medical personnel, and the other two looking tired… but alive. There are also a couple of short newspaper stories mentioning their safe return.

But it seems as though Kilbride made his way over to the Institute a few weeks after touchdown, made his statement, and then: nothing.

I can't find any sign of him, and neither can Basira or Martin. Not on Earth, at least. I really don't want to say he vanished into thin air, but… he's vanished into something.

Beyond that, there's only a few things worth –

BASIRA

Are you ready for that drink?

MELANIE

Well – oh, yes, yes, just give me a second. Finishing off a statement.

BASIRA

Oh, sorry. I thought, you know, because the door was open…

MELANIE

Oh, no, no, I just needed a bit of air flow.

BASIRA

Yeah, it's, it is not cool down here.

MELANIE

Summer in the basement, I suppose.

BASIRA

Yeah. You know, speaking of not cool – did Martin say he was coming today?

MELANIE

Wow. Ouch.

BASIRA

Oh, what, you're gonna judge me? I *literally* don't know anyone here you haven't made cry.

MELANIE

You only know Tim and Martin!

BASIRA

And Elias.

MELANIE

I made *Elias* cry…?

BASIRA

I don't know. Probably. You can be *very* mean.

MELANIE

[Hah!] Right, well… the jury's still out on Elias. And *anyway,* Martin's always been lovely to *you.*

BASIRA

Hmm. I don't know, I mean, you should have seen him when I turned up last year. I think he thought I was trying to steal his

precious Archivist.

MELANIE

Ahhh. I got the *exact same* when John was hiding out, and came to *me* with his "source on the inside" stuff. Martin was *not* impressed.

BASIRA

[ugh] That boy needs to relax.

MELANIE

Or at *least* find someone else to fuss over!

BASIRA

Yeah, he's got it *bad.*

[PAUSE]

BASIRA

Do you know if he and John ever…

MELANIE

No clue, and not interested! Although… according to Georgie, John *doesn't.*

BASIRA

Like, at all?

MELANIE

Yeah.

BASIRA

Yeah, that does explain some stuff. – wait, hang on, do I, do I know Georgie?

MELANIE

I don't think so. Georgie Barker? She does "What the Ghost".

BASIRA

No *way*. I used to love that show. I mean, the first couple of seasons, at least. Took a weird turn in season three, when they introduced –

MELANIE

Well, she and John, they, dated…

BASIRA

Yeah.

MELANIE

I mean, it *was* years ago…

BASIRA

Huh. I always used to put on podcasts, when I was driving around,

you know, when I wasn't on duty. I mean, when Daisy didn't need the radio.

MELANIE

[laughing] I literally *cannot* picture Daisy listening to the radio!

BASIRA

The Archers.

MELANIE

No. *[laughing]*

BASIRA

Hands of God.

MELANIE

I *actually* do not believe you!

BASIRA

She *never* missed an episode.

[LOUD EXHALATION]

BASIRA

Oh, sorry, do you need to finish up?

MELANIE

No… I, I actually, I have no idea what I was going to say. I did have more notes on, um, on space, I guess, but, uh… forget it. Let's go.

BASIRA

Alright, well, I should probably go check in with Martin, you know. See if he's in for drinks.

MELANIE

So you can double-check your gossip.

BASIRA

I don't gossip! *I have the mind of an investigator.*

MELANIE

Right, okay. Anyway, *I'll* go find him. I could really do with the walk. Do you want to go ahead, and grab the booth?

BASIRA

Yeah, sure. I can wait. I've got a book.

MELANIE

Of course you do.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[KNOCKING ON DOOR]

ELIAS

Come in, Melanie.

MELANIE

Martin said you wanted to see me?

[DOOR CLOSING]

ELIAS

Yes, please come in. I thought it was about time for your first performance review.

[MELANIE LAUGHS]

MELANIE

I, um, I didn't even know that was a… well, there wasn't anything scheduled.

ELIAS

No. Well, given the recent, um, *tensions* in the office –

MELANIE

[Heh]

ELIAS

– I thought it probably best if you weren't aware of it in advance.

MELANIE

Right.

ELIAS

Less time to prepare, you understand.

MELANIE

Right.

ELIAS

So. Have a seat.

You've been with us a few months now, I believe.

MELANIE

Yes.

ELIAS

And how are you finding it?

MELANIE

Is that a joke?

ELIAS

Aside from the obvious, I mean.

MELANIE

Oh, well. I, I suppose it's been… unstructured… Without John around, and with you being sat up here lurking, there's not been a lot of useful direction.

ELIAS

I see.

MELANIE

I mean, you pick out a statement occasionally, and John might phone in to ask after some scrap of information. But to be honest, no one's even really told me what an "archival assistant" is actually supposed to do.

ELIAS

So how have you been occupying your time?

MELANIE

[annoyed exhalation] Reading, mostly. Doing some of my *own* research.

ELIAS

Into what?

MELANIE

My *own* projects.

ELIAS

Of course. And plotting my demise.

MELANIE

When I get a chance, yes.

ELIAS

Hm.

MELANIE

I suppose that doesn't look very good on my review.

ELIAS

Quite frankly, no.

MELANIE

Well, if you need to fire me, I won't make a scene.

ELIAS

No. No, I'm afraid not.

MELANIE

Sure. *[sigh]*

ELIAS

I wish I knew the words that would make you believe me.

MELANIE

What? That you are a literal deadman switch? *[muttering]* For goodness sake…

[MELANIE LAUGHS AND INTERJECTS IMPATIENTLY OVER ELIAS AS HE MONOLOGUES AT HER]

ELIAS

You know, if that was the only issue, I could have simply placed the knowledge in your mind.

MELANIE

What!?

ELIAS

You already have doubts, though. You've been talking with Tim, and have convinced yourself that –

[MELANIE LAUGHS]

ELIAS

– even if I'm telling the truth, I'm too dangerous to live.

MELANIE

Well.

ELIAS

Whatever I'm planning needs to be stopped –

[MELANIE LAUGHS]

ELIAS

– even if it cost a few lives. Including your own.

MELANIE

Well, that's not even –

ELIAS

A rationalization, of course. A lie about your own selfishness: that you would rather be dead than trapped without the self-determination you prize so highly. I wish I knew the words to convince you it's for the best.

[PAUSE]

MELANIE

Are we done?

[ELIAS RESUMES MONOLOGUING, MELANIE RESUMES MAKING EXASPERATED NOISES OVER HIM]

ELIAS

It's too deep. I can see almost anything I care to –

MELANIE

[muttering] Christ.

ELIAS

– retrieve knowledge from someone's mind, or place it there. But I just *cannot* change the nature of a person. And I am struggling to think of what could rid you of this misguided rage.

MELANIE

So let me go! Or, kill me!

ELIAS

You know, that is the second such ultimatum I've heard in as many weeks. But no. There are always other options. And I am not above threats.

MELANIE

Threaten, then. I've got nothing.

ELIAS

That's… almost true. Your life is indeed shockingly absent of any meaningful connections. That's actually one of the reasons I chose you for this job.

Your father was your last real anchor, wasn't he?

MELANIE

That's none of your business.

ELIAS

Perhaps. Five years is plenty of time to grieve. It's a real tragedy, isn't it. Dementia? Especially so early. But he always remembered you, didn't he? "Little moth."

MELANIE

Shut up.

ELIAS

At least you got him into a decent care home. Hard to afford on an irregular income like yours, but your mother's life insurance helped plenty.

[MELANIE IS BREATHING HARD, POSSIBLY REPRESSING TEARS]

And Ivy Meadows wasn't as expensive as some of them. It's a shame about the fire. But I would have thought it would offer something of

a relief.

MELANIE

What are you talking about?

ELIAS

Oh. Of course. They told you he died in his sleep, didn't they? Smoke inhalation. A real tragedy, but at least he didn't suffer.

MELANIE

I –

ELIAS

Do you want to know what really killed him?

[MELANIE GASPS AND SOBS]

[ELIAS CONTINUES HIS MONOLOGUE, SPEAKING OVER AS MELANIE AS SHE CRIES]

ELIAS

Awful, isn't it? He *really* suffered. Not really your fault. Just bad luck. That doesn't comfort you, does it?

MELANIE

[crying] Take it back, take, take it back…

ELIAS

I'm afraid that's not really something I can do. I can promise not to make it worse though.

MELANIE

What… no…

ELIAS

You know *how* your father really died. And I am sure that is unimaginably painful for you. But be aware: if I choose to, I can make you *see it.*

MELANIE

No… no, no…

ELIAS

If you try to interfere with me again in *any* way, I will drive that image so deep into your psyche that even if you are right – even if you live – it will be there every time you close your eyes.

[ELIAS FINISHES MONOLOGUING AND PAUSES; MELANIE CONTINUES TO CRY]

ELIAS

[normal voice] That's alright. Take your time. Tell you what, why don't you take the rest of the day off? I'm sure you have a lot to

process.

Anyway, aside from all of that, I'd say your performance has been satisfactory.

[CLICK]

MAG107 - Third Degree

Statement #0100102

[CLICK]

[BACKGROUND NOISE OF CROWDED AIRPORT]

ARCHIVIST

I've, uh, just touched her in O'Hare International Airport, following up on the address I received from Xiaoling.

Apparently they were staying in West Pullman, Chicago. At least, they were when Gertrude requested the statements forwarded on to them. I'm going to get a hotel and follow up the address tomorrow.

I wouldn't normally bother recording here, but I think… I thought I was being followed.

(sigh) I might just be jumpy. I'll keep my eyes peeled.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

The address didn't really pan out. The place deals in short-term rentals, and a dozen people must have gone through that apartment since Gertrude and Gerard stayed there.

The owner did remember her – "that old Brit and her son" – but he said anything they left behind was either sold or thrown out. They did leave a forwarding address, of sorts: anything that came was to be sent on to the Usher Foundation in Washington, DC. Who, I *assume,* would send it on to the Magnus Institute.

I asked him about circuses around at the time, and he said he didn't *remember* there being one, but a few nights while Gertrude was there, he *had* heard music – "like one of those little organs" – coming from West Pullman Park.

I'm planning to make the journey down to Washington in the hopes that Gertrude might have visited the Usher Foundation. According to our earlier emails, they don't have any record of it on file, but… *(sigh)*

I *did* notice however the one of the Greyhound routes there goes through Pittsburgh. Now, according to the details Melanie retrieved a few months back, Pittsburgh is where Gerard Keay allegedly died. He was admitted to UPMC Presbyterian emergency department having suffered a massive seizure, and died less than a day later. I think I might have to pay a visit and ask around.

…

(sigh) Also, I'm *definitely* being followed.

There's a police officer, I saw him at the airport as well, he stood out a bit because he wasn't immigration, or TSA or anything like that. He just, he just looked like a Chicago beat cop.

Well, I saw him again today. And I'm pretty sure he was watching me.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

(hoarsely, wheezing intermittently) The, the hospital was, the hospital was interesting. It's all very well being able to get people to answer your questions, but if they genuinely don't remember something, it's not always as useful as it seems.

I only found one person, Louis Brown, a nurse, who recalls working the night Gerard Keay was admitted. His "mother" was with him – and I almost feel like Gertrude took a perverse joy in the pretense – she explained his condition to the doctor, though could apparently offer no good reason he wasn't in full-time treatment, as his cancer was by this point… very advanced. *(sigh)* They did everything they could to save him, but he had a second seizure shortly after he was admitted, and there was nothing they could do.

Unless he was somehow able to lie to me this nurse, Louis, honestly

believes Gerard Keay is dead. *(sigh)* Maybe I came all this way for nothing.

…

There's one thing I very much *do* need to follow up on, though. Apparently Gertrude was *arrested* shortly afterwards. Louis only heard about this secondhand, but she was… apparently… caught breaking into the morgue… where Gerard's body was being kept…

I need some sleep.

I haven't seen a cop since I left Chicago, so maybe I was wrong.

…

I'm not feeling so good.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

(hoarse, sluggish- and vague-sounding) I've been looking into Gertrude's arrest. I couldn't get through to Melanie, but Martin managed to find a few details online.

Gertrude was arrested for trespassing, but released shortly

afterwards without being charged. I managed to track down the arresting officer, one Jay Rebecks, who said that she'd been found over the body of Gerard Keay reading from a large, strangely-shaped book.

They'd been unable to determine if the mutilations on Gerard's body had been done by her, and in the end she somehow managed to talk them out of pressing charges.

Officer Rebecks didn't remember what she'd said, but he did recall that she'd never returned for the book. It was sitting in evidence for almost a year before, as far as Rebecks was aware, it simply vanished.

I, I don't really know what to make of any of this. I'm, uh, I'm confused, I'm, I'm dizzy, I, I think I saw the police officer from Chicago again, in the station where I was talking to Rebecks.

I…

I'm not… feeling well…

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

(very hoarse) Elias has, um…

I, I, got a letter, well, an envelope… it's, it's a statement. There's, there's a note, "to tide you over," and, uh…

…

Statement of Howard Ewing, regarding his interview with an unidentified member of British Transport Police. Original statement given February 1st, 2010. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

The room is hot. It's small and there are no windows, and the table is sheet metal. It shouldn't be so hot in January, but I think maybe they've just got the heating turned up too high. When I rest my arm on the table too long, I can see the patches of sweat on the smooth surface as I lift them up again. I've asked for water so many times, and he always says it's coming, but it hasn't come yet.

He just sits there. He's wearing the uniform of the British Transport Police. Three pips on his shoulder, but he won't show me his badge, he won't show me any ID.

Why are they doing this? I didn't do anything. The officers that brought me here were friendly, kind. It was only after they left and it got so hot and he started sitting across from me.

He's smiling, asking me questions again and again.

“What were you doing earlier tonight?”

My job, I was doing my job. Cleaning Moorgate Station. Me and Kelly and Vihan were the night cleaners and that’s what we were doing. We’d done the ticket office and the corridors and the entrances and we were getting started on the platforms. Why is that so hard for him to understand?

He laughs, and I wince as sweat drops into my eye.

“When did you first notice something was wrong?”

We had just started work on the platform itself when we heard the tannoy come on. I don’t know how. As far as I kne, it wasn’t even powered. But there was that slight crackle and then: “this is a security announcement”

We all waited, confused, but what came out next sounded muffled, like it was coming up through five feet of water. I couldn’t make out any of the words, and from the looks on their faces, neither could my colleagues. We strained to listen, but after a few seconds it was silent again.

We all looked at each other and Vihan started to shrug when there came an incredible shrieking noise from the speakers. It felt like needles through my eardrums, and it was all I could do to stay upright. I saw Kelly fall to the floor clutching her head.

Then it stopped completely, and we all looked at each other again, catching our breath, trying to figure out who to report this to, and

how.

“How did you become aware of the train?”

The first thing I noticed was the smell. Even before the noise or the heat, there was a sticky greasy smell in the air, like burning chemicals and spoiled bacon. I tried to figure out where it was coming from, and I realized it got stronger the closer to the tunnel mouth I moved. By the time I reached the end of the platform I was almost gagging.

The others looked like they had mostly recovered from the screeching tannoy, and were noticing my odd movements and came over to investigate themselves.

I saw Vihan pull a face as he approached, and I pointed weakly to the opening of the tunnel. I carefully climbed down onto the tracks and looked out into the dark that led to Old Street. That’s when I saw it.

“What did the carriage look like?”

It was hard to tell through the flames. They were all over it, curling and writhing and crawling through the crevices in the wreckage. It wasn’t intact, though. Parts of it were clearly crumpled and broken, and I saw shards of steel and glass embedded in the wall. It was lit by the dim red flames.

“What did it look like?”

There were people still inside. I could see them, arms and heads

reaching out of broken windows and split metal, blackened and rendered almost unrecognizable by the fire and the heat, but they still moved and twitched and cried out in pain and terror, scratching at the edge of their burning metal tomb. But everything was choked and surrounded by a thick acrid black smoke that stunned my eyes and lungs, so nothing seemed the same from one moment to the next.

“What did it look like?”

It looked like hell.

“What did you hear?”

Everything. The tunnel echoed and funneled the sounds until I could hear every agonized cry, every pop and crackle of the fire, the groaning of metal that matched the groaning of the wounded and the dying, it all hit me at once, like the tunnel was pushing the tidal wave of sound out just for me. The shape was perfect for a terrible screaming oven.

From behind me I heard the shouts of Kelly and Rehan, though I don’t know if it was because they saw it, too, or because they saw me fall to my knees in horror.

I could hear the tannoy again, now clearly speaking: “Will Inspector Sands please report, will Inspector Sands please report,” over and over again.

He smiles, and the tiny room gets hotter.

“Who is Inspector Sands?”

It’s a code, one of the codes we use to alert staff to situations of disaster or fire. It usually means there’s a fire. It’s to keep people calm. It’s meant to not cause any panic, keep them safe, even if there’s an emergency.

He laughs, and I wish I could go home.

“How many people were on the train?”

I don’t know.

“What sort of train carriage was it?”

I don’t know.

“Where did it come from?”

I don’t know.

“Did you scream?”

Yes.

At least I think so. The back of my throat was dry and hot and painful, so my mouth must have been open. I think I was screaming.

“What were your colleagues doing?”

Vihan was gripping me by the shoulders, shaking me, yelling at me to wake up. But I was awake, I was wide awake, and I think in some

ways he was talking to himself. Kelly was walking past me, trying to battle through the choking rancid smoke.

I hope she was planning to try and rescue those trapped in the wreckage, but maybe she was simply trying to join them.

I couldn't do anything to help either of them, and I knew that if I touched them I would burn them.

He inhales as if in triumph.

"And where are they now?"

They're dead.

At least that's what I was told when the officers brought me here.

They found no wreckage, nothing in the tunnels, no corpses wailing through an underground inferno, just the dead and burnt bodies of Kelly Dwyer and Vihan Prasad.

"What do you love most in the world?"

The question sends a shock through my whole body. I know this is what he wants, all he truly cares about. I want to lie, to say that I love nothing and nobody, that I am alone in the world, and he'll have to look elsewhere. My tongue burns in my mouth as I try to keep it still.

"What do you love most in the world?"

My father. I love my father more than anything.

“Who am I?”

I don’t answer, and he lets me leave.

My father is dead a week later.

A heart attack at the age of 63. Everyone is surprised and saddened, but not shocked. I try to tell myself it’s a coincidence, that a heart attack is the most natural death in the world, but at the funeral, despite arranging it myself, despite selecting the burial plot and the headstone, I watch as they take my father off for cremation, and nobody can tell me why. They simply say how sorry they are for my loss, and hand me my father’s ashes. I don’t want his ashes.

I know he’ll be back, the policeman with three bright pips on his shoulder.

And he’ll ask me what else I love. And I’ll tell him.

Then he’ll ask me who he is, and I won’t say.

I don’t want to cause any panic.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

…

(sigh) I’m going to bed.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

I feel… a lot better.

I'd love to rattle off a list of potential other reasons for this – nice rational causes of recovery – but… I think we're past the point of transparent rationalizations. It looks like the recording of statements has now passed over from psychological compulsion into a more *physical* dependence.

I don't know whether this is some sort of classical addiction, or something a bit deeper. But either way, this is not the time for experimentation. I am on a deadline, and if I need to be reading statements to stay well enough, then I suppose that's what I shall do.

What irritates me most is that Elias was clearly aware of this, hence his sending me this, which seems to serve no other purpose but as a restorative. But, *as usual,* he chose to keep this very useful information to himself.

I think I've reached another dead end here. I've decided it's the last one. The Institute needs me there, not jetting around the world following a cold trail that may well not have led to anything useful the first time.

(sigh) I've a Greyhound booked down to Washington DC tomorrow.

I'm going to stop in at the Usher Foundation, just in case they have anything that might help, and then I'm flying home.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

I'm at a rest stop. The, uh, the buses, they're, they're giving us a comfort break, but there's, there's a woman here in the cafe, the diner, whatever. I've seen her car, I think she's following the bus. She's early 30s, I think, dressed nondescript: hard-wearing denim, old leather.

And she is… definitely watching me. She doesn't *look* like – she's coming over, I think –

Hello? Uhh, can I… help you?

WOMAN

Sure. Whatever you're reaching for, don't.

ARCHIVIST

I… what?

WOMAN

Keep your hands on the table, and we can all walk away from this.

ARCHIVIST

You, you're English.

WOMAN

So are you. Ah-ah! Hands on the table.

ARCHIVIST

Who are you?

WOMAN

Julia. Who are you?

ARCHIVIST

Uh… uh, you don't know me?

JULIA

Should I?

ARCHIVIST

No, I-I guess! Just, uh, I mean everyone normally seems to.

JULIA

Hm. Good for you.

ARCHIVIST

N-not really.

JULIA

So, who are you?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, uh, uh, Jonathan! – uh, John. Sims. Uh, I'm the Head Archivist for the Magnus Institute. London.

JULIA

Oh, you don't say. So what brings you down to the I-70. Pennsylvania.

ARCHIVIST

Uh, look, I mean… you're the one following *me*.

JULIA

We were told you were asking some interesting questions around a few places back in Pittsburgh. And you seem to have attracted the attention of something we've been watching for a while.

ARCHIVIST

…uh… my, my bus is leaving…

JULIA

Let it. You're riding with me.

ARCHIVIST

I don't think so.

JULIA

Then try to run.

Go on.

ARCHIVIST

So… kidnapped. *Again.*

JULIA

Think of it like… an escort. Personal bodyguard.

You're heading to DC, right? Come on, we can chat in the car. I'm sure you've got a *ton* of librarian stories. The miles will just *fly* by.

ARCHIVIST

Do I have any choice?

JULIA

If you did you'd only make a mistake.

[ARCHIVIST SIGHS]

Come on.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[SOUNDS OF INSIDE OF MOVING CAR]

ARCHIVIST

…are you alright? You seem, uh…

JULIA

Sure. Just keeping an eye out. Waiting, you know.

…

So you're from the Magnus Institute?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, yes. You, you know the Institute…?

JULIA

Oh, yeah. Checked myself in there a while back. Ended up spilling my guts to this old woman about my dad. Just, letting it all out.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, uh, that would be Gertrude. My, my predecessor.

JULIA

Didn't catch her name.

Weirdest thing, really. Didn't mean to spill half of it, but… really helped me put the pieces together. You know?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, I'm starting to.

JULIA

Hm.

You still haven't told me what you're doing this side of the pond. Or why you're asking around about Gerard Keay.

ARCHIVIST

Uh *(nervous laugh)*… would you… believe me if I said I was trying to save the world?

JULIA

Probably not.

ARCHIVIST

…

What about you?

What brings the daughter of Robert Montauk all the way out here?

And why, exactly are you –

[SIRENS AS POLICE CAR APPROACHES]

[JULIA PULLS OVER TO THE SIDE OF THE ROAD]

JULIA

(quietly) Hunting.

[FOOTSTEPS AS POLICE OFFICER APPROACHES]

[TAP ON WINDOW; JULIA ROLLS IT DOWN]

POLICE OFFICER

License and registration.

JULIA

Can I see some ID, please?

POLICE OFFICER

Of course… you British?

JULIA

I have my green card, Officer… Mustermann.

MUSTERMANN

And your friend?

JULIA

Visiting from home!

ARCHIVIST

Julia…

MUSTERMANN

Does he have his passport on him?

ARCHIVIST

Julia.

JULIA

I *assume* so. Can't say I asked him – *John.*

ARCHIVIST

J-J-Julia, I-I don't, I don't think – ah…

MUSTERMANN

Step out of the car, please, sir.

JULIA

Now, hang on a second.

MUSTERMANN

Step out. Of the car.

[TWO METALLIC CLUNKING SOUNDS]

MUSTERMANN

Pop the trunk, ma'am.

JULIA

I mean, there's nothing *in* there.

MUSTERMANN

I'm not gonna ask you again.

JULIA

…

Fine.

MUSTERMANN

Don't move. Either one of you.

[FOOTSTEPS]

[SOUND OF TRUNK BEING OPENED]

MUSTERMANN

HOLY SH –

[A GUNSHOT]

[JULIA LAUGHS AS MUSTERMANN SWEARS AND SHOUTS]

[ANOTHER GUNSHOT]

[GRUNTING]

[FOOTSTEPS]

MAN

Oh, bloody hell, Jule. You said you'd stop after a couple of miles. Been near on an hour.

Ohhh, look at my neck, it don't feel right…

JULIA

Oh, you knew it might take a while.

MAN

This him, then?

JULIA

It is. John, Trevor.

ARCHIVIST

Uh – T-Trevor Herbert, the, the Vampire Killer!

TREVOR

Julia…

JULIA

He works for the Magnus Institute. He's read *all* about us.

TREVOR

Oh. Well, isn't that something.

JULIA

My thoughts exactly.

TREVOR

Time for that later. You two help me now, this one needs its head off.

JULIA

You didn't kill it?!

TREVOR

We don't know what it is yet, do we?

JULIA

Ugh!

ARCHIVIST

What, the, the, the police officer? I think I have an idea.

TREVOR

Oh-ho! Do you now. Then you get the axe. It's in the boot.

ARCHIVIST

I-I-I, I don't…

JULIA

Come on.

ARCHIVIST

…right. Uh…

[CLICK]

MAG108 – Monologue

Statement #0092008

[CLICK]

MARTIN

Martin Blackwood, archival assistant at the Magnus Institute recording statement number 0092008. Statement of Adonis Biros, given August 20th, 2009.

Statement begins.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

It's been so hot recently, that sticky sort of hot you only really get in the city. On the beach, watching the clear blue waters swell and recede, it would be wonderful to simply sit, still and alone; to experience it. But in the city there is no stillness, no privacy. The swell is that of rank, sweaty humanity , and to press through them is to work the dirt and dust that infuses the air into your own skin. The stink is deeper than just a simple smell.

I suppose I'm lucky that my work rarely takes me out during the middle of the day. I am an actor by trade, and both skilled and fortunate enough to find myself employed more often than not. I'm not sure I would say I enjoy it, necessarily, but I do find a certain

fulfillment in it

I remember the first time I felt the calling. I was nine years old, visiting my grandparents in Athens, and my parents had taken me on a trip to see the great amphitheatre. It was winter, not the season for tourists. My parents were off in a corner somewhere arguing, but just for a moment I had the place entirely to myself. And I felt it: that strange centering, that spot at the core of everything where you and you alone speak. Your words heard by no one – and in that no one, the entire universe.

Yes, I am aware that normally there is – unless something has gone badly wrong – an audience, or at the very least other actors with which to trade dialogue. And that's fine. But that is not what I live for. I live for the monologue: when all others fade away and the light tightens on me, excluding all else.

Have you ever had stage lights in your eyes? The brightness steals everything else, and if it's strong enough, you can look out into the audience and see nothing at all. Just you.

I am a fine actor, and a very capable physical performer, but these are simply the dues I pay to earn my way to a monologue. For the last two weeks, I have been performing the part of Jaques in *As You Like It.* Do you know your Shakespeare?

Well, it's not the greatest production of the play, which can be very funny if done right. The director, a man named David Austin, has neither the vision nor the spark to turn it into something truly

memorable, and the reviews reflect that. I don't care, though. That's not why I do it. You see, there is one part of as you like it that almost every English-speaking person will know, and that is a monologue by Jaques:

> "All the world's a stage,
>
> And all the men and women on it merely players:
>
> They have their exits and their entrances;
>
> And one man in his time plays many parts,
>
> His acts being seven ages."

I told you you'd know it. And for all his failings Mr. David Austin made one directorial decision for which I cannot praise him enough: during this soliloquy, he has the other actors in the scene walk upstage, beyond the lights, and has me delivering the lines out into the audience alone.

For the play, it's a bad decision: that scene is supposed to be Jaques performing, joking, for the amusement of the Duke and his friends, so this staging makes something that should be light and energetic into a serious and soulful meditation, and it doesn't work from a dramatic point of view. But for me, declaiming, casting my voice out, surrounded by people watching me, yet completely alone… I have rarely had a part that feeds my soul like this one.

It helps that we're performing at the Duke's Theatre in Covent Garden: it's about as traditional a theatre as you're likely to find,

and when the light shines, the audience is rendered as mere silhouettes, completely anonymous.

At least, until four nights ago.

It was my big moment: Act 2, Scene 7. The others had vanished, the audience was gone, and it was just me. At least, at first. I remember it was as I began to talk about “the justice,” the fifth age of man, that I saw it. It was a mask, a theatre mask. Not one of the happy-sad ones you might associate with the stage, but like an old Greek chorus mask, neutral with a faint aspect of mourning about the mouth and eyes. It sat on top of a thick black cloak draped to completely cover whoever might be wearing the mask.

But I knew it was empty. It was a hollow shape of a man that had no life, no presence to it. And I saw it in the middle of the third row as clearly as if it were lit by a second spotlight.

I stumbled. Of course I stumbled. I don’t believe anyone in the actual audience really noticed, though the other actors offered their faux-sympathies over it afterwards. I did make it to the end, and pushed on through the rest of the performance, but the mask did not disappear, and watching the other actors quickly convinced me that either they did not notice the thing in the third row, or they simply could not see it.

Oddly, I’ve never feared for my sanity. I’ve always been… superstitious, and I had no doubt that what I had seen was some sort of spectre or omen. Of what, however, I had absolutely no idea.

To be perfectly honest, I still don't. This is one of the reasons I am here: because I have this deep and gnawing fear that it portends nothing but itself, and within that, there is some strangely aweful fate waiting for me.

I have never been quite as social as I am told an actor should be. Rehearsals have always been a professional thing for me, and have rarely resulted in friendships, and I actively avoid after-show drinks. It will perhaps not surprise you to discover I instead prefer to walk the city, to find those streets and places where the night crowd does not gather, and wander those empty lights, clearing my head as I leave the heat and cloying conversation behind. In the summer months, this ritual is almost a necessity for me to remain stable, my steps taking me through the echoing streets and artificial lights, an edifice to humanity uncluttered by the messy existence of actual people.

The mask and cloak did not appear at the theater the following night. I looked for it, yet saw nothing but an audience of silhouettes, quiet and intent, save for when applause was required.

It wasn't my best performance, on edge as I was, but I got through it. Afterward, Patrick Dunlevy, who played Orlando, was more insistent than usual that I join them for drinks after the show, and it took all my composure to keep my excuses polite, as the sticky heat of his presence pressed through over the fading warmth of the stage lights and the high summer that pervaded even the Duke of York.

But I did escape him, and fled into the cooling dampness of the city

streets by night. Streets which I knew were less likely to be populated were mercifully deserted, and the windows of the buildings either side were lit, but empty of anybody visible. My breathing began to slow, my steps became more sure, and the oppressive thickness of the air lessened just enough for me to relax.

I began to look up at all the darkened windows above street level. It's a strange truth to realize that, for all the throng of humanity that exists in central London, almost nobody actually lives there. All the apartments and residences that sit above the bustling shopfronts and businesses are almost all empty. Bought as investments by the financiers and oligarchs who have no desire or need to live in them. If you raise your eyes upwards in central London, and count the lit windows, it's not at all unusual to see none at all.

But that night, as I caught my breath and raised my head, there was a lit window on the second floor, and within it, a masked mockery of a human figure. My face fell, until I had the odd certainty that my expression matched that of my pursuer, and panic began to settle over my brain, pinprick-crawling from the back, inch by inch over my skull. And I knew that when it reached my eyes I would run.

The figure didn't move. Of course it didn't, there was nothing to it that could move – no will that could make it follow me. And yet, it still watched, its hollow empty eyes drawing me into it.

I ran for some time, through streets I knew should be humming with drunks and nighthawks and insomniacs, but they were all

silent. I was alone. Sometimes when I turned a corner, at the far end I could see it, waiting for me, and I would turn away. Sometimes, when I looked over my shoulder, I would see it there, following me with its stillness, its absence.

Once I looked up, and the windows were full of it.

I don't know how long I ran, but in the end I fell, physically spent, and sunken in despair. Raising my head, I saw it before me, waiting. So I stood, and began to walk slowly towards it.

It gave no reaction, simply awaiting my arrival. As I got closer, I saw it more clearly: the heavy weave of the black woolen cloak; the shining porcelain of the mask; the hollow, empty space behind the eyes, inside the mouth. I faced my demon, and there was nothing there.

In a fit of sudden rage, I struck out, my arm catching it on the side of what should have been a head. But the cloth crumpled beneath my blow, the mask fell, and the figure collapsed into a heap. Inside was a simple wooden stick, once propping the thing up, but now fallen to the ground and lying motionless.

I went home quickly, my eyes downcast and furtive, and went to bed. I only once looked out of my window at the street below.

I don't think it's going to stop. Last night was the worst yet. I knew they were coming, but how do you prepare for something like that? The first was there in the audience before I even set foot on the stage. By my second entrance, there were five that I could count.

And when I began my monologue, the whole auditorium was full of masks.

All the world's a stage, and it was empty – my only company, the mocking grotesques of pantomimed humanity. The mewling infant, the schoolboy, the lover, the soldier, the judge, each eliciting such a roar of nothing from them it took my breath away.

Perhaps I should have stopped: fled the stage, quit acting entirely. But it was like a lonely avalanche, and it flowed out of me in a wave. And I reached oblivion. An absence of applause that nearly deafened me. Sans everything.

After the show, David came up to me. He wore his best director's smile, and made as to shake my hand. His mouth moved telling me how much this performance had meant to him, how right the energy had been, and how whatever I had tapped into within myself, I should reach for it again at the next performance.

I tried to listen, to nod, but his eyes were hollow, and I knew that he wasn't really there.

I have another performance tonight. In less than four hours, I will be on that stage again, speaking those empty lines to emptier ears.

I could run, of course, but I won't. Where would I run to? All the world's a stage, and I can't escape my monologue.

MARTIN

Statement ends.

(exhale) That wasn't so bad… *(inhale)* I'm… not sure there is anything to say about this one. John's got us looking into anything that might involve theatres or the circus, but to be honest, I don't think this is really what he's looking for. The strangers here seem… er, different, I guess? It doesn't have any clowns, or dancing, or… skin.

I wanted to ask Tim about it, but he hasn't been around much the last week or so. Says he's working on something, which is… I mean, it *could* be fine? I guess? He's just… quite… *intense* at the moment… He – scares me sometimes.

Truth be told, none of us are doing *great,* but it's actually Melanie who seems – I don't know, something's happened, I think. Her work's been kind of… *off* lately, and any time I talk to her, she just finds some reason to leave. I asked her to look into what happened to Adonis Biros, the actor from the statement, and she hasn't bothered, as far as I can tell.

John called. He's in America now, wanted her to help with something, but I had to make an excuse for her. He, he doesn't need that kind of thing on his mind right now…

I just hope he gets back soon.

…You know, saying it out loud, I, I think I'm actually really worried about Melanie. I – *(sigh)* you know what, Basira knows her better than. I've *(laugh)* been too awkward to ask, but I *need* to. I really think I need to –

[CHAIR SCRAPES]

[DOOR OPENS AND MARTIN STEPS OUT]

MARTIN

(calling out in the hall) Basira?

…Melanie?

…Tim…?

[HIGH-PITCHED, SQUEALING STATIC BEGINS]

[DOOR CLOSES AS MARTIN RETURNS]

PETER

Martin, isn't it?

MARTIN

(gasp) D-don't move! And, don't you come any closer, okay?! I've got a, I've got a *knife!*

PETER

Do you? That would seem wildly out-of-character, from what I've been told.

MARTIN

Okay, but – okay, *stay back!*

PETER

Please, Martin, I'm not going to hurt you. I just thought we might have a chat.

Alone.

MARTIN

Oh. You're… one of them, aren't you? A, a Lukas.

PETER

Yes, that's – Peter, pleased to meet you! Now, how did you know that?

MARTIN

I, I was just, reading? John left some notes, and –

PETER

I see. I'm sorry to have disturbed you.

It's one of Elias's little jokes.

MARTIN

I don't – what?!

PETER

Did *he* suggest you record a statement today? One that mentioned me?

MARTIN

Yeah? Sort of – I mean, you know, not you *specifically,* but –

PETER

I have a meeting with him today. He suggested it. I'm sure he's watching from his office, grinning from ear to ear.

MARTIN

I… don't…

PETER

I almost thought he genuinely wanted me to meet the team. Ah, well.

MARTIN

I'm really sorry – I-I don't actually – ahaha –

PETER

Do I scare you, Martin?

MARTIN

Yes!

PETER

Hmm. Probably for the best. And what's Elias like to work for? Aside from orchestrating unsettling encounters? *(laugh)*

MARTIN

That's… that's a lot of it, to be honest.

PETER

And that's not something you look for in an employer, I assume?

MARTIN

Well, he's… I mean, you just… you've just said he's watching us.

PETER

Almost certainly.

How is he as a boss?

MARTIN

Fine, I guess? I mean, not so much with the manipulation, and… sometimes… the murder?

PETER

Oh! That *doesn't* sound like the Elias I know. He killed people *himself?*

MARTIN

I mean I wasn't, I wasn't *there,* but that's what he said? And I did

see the body. Bodies.

PETER

Elias Bouchard, getting his hands dirty… ah, well. *Must* be the end times.

MARTIN

Don't…

PETER

So, your advice would be *less* murder?

MARTIN

I… suppose!?

PETER

No, no, it's a good observation, I thank you for it.

MARTIN

You're wel…come…

PETER

Well, I'm sure I've disturbed you quite enough for one day. Martin, I have a meeting to get to and a few things to tell Elias to his face about wasting both our time. Be seeing you! As it were.

[DOOR OPENS]

[SQUEALING STATIC FADES OUT]

MARTIN

Y-yeah! Bye?

[DOOR CLOSES]

MARTIN

…what?!

BASIRA

Did you call me?

MARTIN

Yeah! Um… did you see anyone?

BASIRA

When?

MARTIN

Out there, just now?

BASIRA

Um, no…?

MARTIN

No?

BASIRA

No.

MARTIN

(sigh) That figures.

BASIRA

So, did you need anything, or…?

MARTIN

Does the name Peter Lukas mean anything to you?

BASIRA

Oh! *Yes,* actually. I've been reading a bunch of old statements, he's that creepy old boat captain, right? From the family Elias doesn't want us bothering.

MARTIN

Yeah, well, apparently that warning doesn't go *both* ways.

BASIRA

He was here?

MARTIN

Yeah. I, I mean, I think, I *think* so…?

BASIRA

Was he… *woOoOo?*

MARTIN

I mean, a bit, yeah.

BASIRA

Oh. Oh, dear.

MARTIN

Mmmmaybe? I don't know, honestly, he was just a *bit*… weeeeird.

BASIRA

Yeah. Is that why you wanted me?

MARTIN

Oh, no, like – you busy?

BASIRA

A bit. I was reading through a bunch of stuff about the Church of the Divine Host…?

[AS BASIRA SPEAKS, MARTIN CONTINUOUSLY MAKES

FRUSTRATED LITTLE NOISES IN AN EFFORT TO INDICATE THAT HE DOES NOT WANT TO DISCUSS THIS RIGHT NOW]

Did you look into that statement about the chapel in Hither Green? Because apparently, right around that time, there was a full solar eclipse going on in – guess where…?

MARTIN

I don't know.

BASIRA

Ny-Ålesund! And when Natalie Ennis talked about it being 300 years ago – well! How much do you know about the relationship between Edmond Halley and John Flamsteed?

MARTIN

What – Halley like the comet?

BASIRA

Exactly.

MARTIN

Look, Basira, that's *really* interesting but that's not why – uh, uh, you're close to Melanie, right?

BASIRA

Um, I guess so? Closer than anyone here, I think.

MARTIN

Is she, she doing okay?

BASIRA

Why? Did she… say something?

MARTIN

No… no, it's just her work's been… look, she's always been quite, you know, conscientious, but then recently, everything's –

BASIRA

Okay, look. I don't know what the situation is, she *won't* tell me, but she's *not* doing well. We were meant to go for a drink last week, but… I *think* it has something to do Elias.

MARTIN

Elias. Oh, god…

BASIRA

Yeah.

MARTIN

Well, well, maybe we can – what?

Oh. Right.

[CLICK; MARTIN SWITCHES OFF THE TAPE RECORDER]

MAG109 – Nightfall

Statement #0172906

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Well?

TREVOR

She said you could turn it on. Didn't say anything about talking.

ARCHIVIST

Look, we, we're on the same side –

JULIA

If you're telling the truth.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, I don't know what proof I can give you.

JULIA

Uh, well, if you're *right* about it, it won't be long until Officer Mustermann over here is able to talk again. That should be illuminating.

TREVOR

He's almost got his lungs again! If you can call *them* lungs.

JULIA

Eh, as long as they can push air, they'll do.

ARCHIVIST

Uh, and, if you don't like what he has to say…?

JULIA

Then this cabin is a long way away from anything that can hear you.

[JULIA AND TREVOR LAUGH]

ARCHIVIST

And, and, and if I run?

TREVOR

I'm very much hoping that you do.

[JULIA AND TREVOR LAUGH AGAIN]

ARCHIVIST

I read your statement, you know, you, you don't kill people. Only

monsters.

TREVOR

The line gets blurrier every day.

ARCHIVIST

What about you, Julia? Following in your dad's footsteps?

JULIA

It's a legacy I've learned to be proud of. *(heh)* There are people who'd sell us *all* out to things you can't even imagine. I'm happy doing what it takes to stop that.

ARCHIVIST

Murder?

JULIA

Why not? Everything dies. You think if you walk out of this cabin, you just keep going ? Something gets you, even if it's just time.

Mostly, though life on this planet ends violently. It's the most natural thing in the world; and sometimes, it makes the world a better place.

ARCHIVIST

And… when something comes for you?

JULIA

Mh. Then I die.

ARCHIVIST

That, that doesn't… scare you?

JULIA

Every second.

[SOUND OF "OFFICER MUSTERMANN" BREATHING THROUGH PARTIALLY-REGROWN LUNGS]

ARCHIVIST

Can, can we keep that somewhere else…?

TREVOR

I want it where I can see it.

ARCHIVIST

And when you're satisfied that I'm not trying to harm you?

TREVOR

If you're right about that ritual, I guess, you talk to Gerard.

ARCHIVIST

You said he was dead…

JULIA

(spooky voice) He is.

TREVOR

(laugh)

ARCHIVIST

…r-right…

So we just… wait.

JULIA

That's the plan.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

…

[FURTHER LUNG-REGROWTH SOUNDS]

ARCHIVIST

Look – perhaps if, all we can do is listen to this… r-regrowing itself, may I suggest a way to pass the time?

JULIA

Sure. You want our story?

TREVOR

Gave you folks plenty already.

ARCHIVIST

I, I mean, yes… but the situation has changed quite a bit…? Last I heard, you were dying of lung cancer.

TREVOR

I was.

ARCHIVIST

And now…?

TREVOR

I'm not. *(heh)*

ARCHIVIST

And that doesn't strike you as… odd.

TREVOR

Not much I see these days isn't "odd" somehow or other. Not gonna turn my nose up at one bit of it worked out well for me. I hunt monsters; my lungs don't kill me. Seems like a fair trade. No big

job, is it.

ARCHIVIST

Wh-what about you, Julia? Care, care to make a statement? Maybe about how you met Trevor?

JULIA

Sure, why not.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

JULIA

It's not like you or your tape recorder get to leave here without us.

ARCHIVIST

(clears throat) Statement of Julia Montauk, regarding her initial encounter with the hunter, Trevor Herbert.

Uh, when did this happen?

JULIA

About six years ago?

TREVOR

Seven! 2010.

JULIA

Sure. Summer 2010.

ARCHIVIST

Statement taken direct from subject June 29th, 2017.

Statement begins.

JULIA (STATEMENT)

I tried to live a normal life. I really did. I took jobs working in the backroom of offices where I wouldn't need to meet anyone. I had boyfriends who promised they didn't care. I burned through half a dozen counselors. None of it worked.

You see, my father's always remained one of the darlings of the true crime community. Articles, documentaries, grisly retrospectives: wherever I ended up, somehow it would always worm its way into my life. One of my co-workers or new friends would stumble across a profile of my father, and that would be that. Every time I ended up in a relationship, it was only a matter of time before I caught them on some true crime blog, or spotted a profile of my father in their search history.

Sometimes, I tried to lie about it, so there was no relation, but the damage was done. They'd get distant, throw me nervous glances when they didn't think I'd notice. Or worse, they started to look at me like I was some sort of prize, some small claim to fame: the serial killer's daughter.

I suppose I could have changed my name. Um, something always stopped me though: it was the only connection I still had to my dad, and even if it did keep ruining my life, I couldn't bring myself to lose it.

The counselors and the therapists were more understanding… but even they couldn't quite keep the eager quiver out of their voice when I started talking about the murders. It felt like every couple of years, I was having to start my life over from scratch.

What is it, do you think, that makes people so obsessed with horrific things happening to other people? Even now, after all I've done, I can't quite figure out what it is that makes people treat *actual atrocities* like cheap entertainment.

Maybe we're all just broken inside, unable to really grasp the difference between fictional people, and people we just don't know. They're all just abstract ideas we're happy to have suffer for our enjoyment.

Or… maybe the fact it *really happened* is exactly the point, adding the awful spice of reality to people's morbid fantasies.

When I think of the lurid joy some people would feel if I were caught – the serial killer's daughter taking over the family business – it makes me sick. But even back then, with my hands unbloodied, that collective obsession with brutality chased me throughout my life.

In the summer of 2010, I made another attempt to outrun my

father's legacy, and moved up to Manchester to take a new job. It was night shift work, security and maintenance for an old office building, occupied by a handful of failing companies trying to save money on floor space.

I liked it because I didn't really have to talk to anyone. I was on the desk alone, and generally anyone working there late enough to cross paths with me wasn't in a talking mood.

There was another reason that I chose to work nights. If you read my statement, then I'm sure it will come as no surprise that for most of my life, I've had a pretty significant fear of the dark. I used to lie awake at night… listening, straining my ears for the noise of movement, or that dreadful growl coming out of the dark.

It was one of my better counselors that suggested I try working nights as a way to address it. And it worked. For the most part. It made the darkness mundane, just another aspect of my everyday life to be dealt with, and kept me within the comforting glow of lamps and light bulbs basically all the time. It also let me sleep during the day, when the faintest hint of sunlight that crept around the edges of my thick bedroom curtains made me feel safe enough to relax. It made dating even harder, of course, but by that point I'd mostly given up trying. It wasn't a perfect solution, by any means, but it helped. To start with, at least.

I never really worried about keeping track of the companies that kept offices in my building. It seemed like that came and went pretty regularly. Sometimes a start-up would make it big, but

usually it was the inevitable bankruptcy that moved them out.

All except DKN Systems. I never really figured out what it was they were meant to be doing. Something full of meaningless buzzwords, like “business networks” or “media solutions.” Thinking about it, it might actually have been “business media network solutions.” Point is, there didn’t seem to be anything suspicious about them. At least not at first.

I knew a bit more about them than the other people renting space, since they seemed to do a lot of work after dark, and there were a handful of their staff I knew on sight. I mean, I *assumed* they also did a lot of work in the daytime that I just wasn’t seeing. So it didn’t seem particularly weird. Just another small business burning the candle everywhere they could to stay afloat.

But even if the company itself didn’t seem weird, the people who worked for it really did. I remember there were four of them normally around, and at one point I thought it must have been a family thing, because I got it in my head that they were related. I don’t know why – they didn’t even look that similar – but there was just something about their faces. It was the eyes, I think. It looked like they all had irises so dark that they almost seemed completely black.

And they dressed the same. Not like a uniform, but they all wore black trousers, a dark blue shirt, and a brown leather belt. They also wore soft-soled black canvas shoes, which were almost completely silent when walking down the carpeted halls of the

building.

It made them even more unsettling, quietly wandering the corridors, never quite looking where they were going, like their attention was focused on something you just couldn't see.

There was only one of them that ever spoke, at least to me: a young guy called Vardhan Darvish. He seemed to be the manager, at least as much as there was any clear structure. And unlike his colleagues, he seemed happy, almost eager, to talk.

I asked him about it once, and he laughingly told me that his co-workers didn't sign up for the quality of conversation. He'd chat with me about my job and the latest headline – which he *always* had a strong opinion about. We never discussed any details of his life, though, or his job. He generally came over to let me know about a blown light bulb somewhere in the building, and then stick around for a bit of conversation.

I once jokingly suggested he must be breaking the lights himself for an excuse to talk to me. And he laughed, but then got kind of quiet, and didn't stick around to talk.

At the time, I assumed my awkward flirting had made it weird… but unfortunately not! *(laugh)*

TREVOR (STATEMENT)

Bulbs were breaking because of what they were doing around the offices.

I'd been tracking Darvish for a good few weeks by then. There'd been a couple of homeless I knew gone missing around Parrs Wood, where I were keeping back then. Now, *usually* I wouldn't pay much mind – was the summer, after all – but there were a couple of ladies gone. So I checked in with shelters, and a worker that dealt with them, but no one had the first clue. I knew Morris had at least a kid with a woman down in Moss Side, so *he* wouldn't've skipped down – but she hadn't seen him neither.

My first thought were vampires, as they like to go after rough sleepers. But I knew, by then, there were other horrors kicking around – not to mention your mundane murderers.

Didn't matter to me, of course! Not by then. I had a hunt on, and I was going to see it through. It weren't long after I went down to see you folk, so I was still convinced I were on the way out. And caution weren't something I cared for. *(laugh)*

Don't recall exactly how Darvish got on my radar. Someone had seen something that sent me somewhere that led me to him, I don't, I don't know. Point is, soon as I saw him, I knew he were the one I were after. There was a smell to him: something dark and sick, rolling off him in waves. Sure, he didn't smell like a vampire, but he smelt like something that weren't meant to be in this world. So, I reckoned I best help him out of it.

Took to following him for a couple of days. Didn't know exactly what he was, or what he wanted, so I weren't keen to charge right in. He seemed normal at first, mind. Happy enough in the sun

(heh), though he worked nights. That's how I first saw him. Didn't spot *me* – or if he did, he never paid me no mind. They never do.

Third night, I spotted him at work, taking a delivery. It were a big truck for some company called "Outer Bay." I tried to follow them up since, but didn't find much. Then again, maybe I didn't know what I were looking for – I mean, to anyone else, the box they were unloading would have looked like nothing much.

But if there's one thing I know, it's what a box looks like when it's got someone inside.

There's a certain shape it tends to be, and the folk carrying it have to take a second to manage its shifting weight. Might have looked like a big old flight case, but as soon as I saw it, I was certain there was somebody inside. What I didn't know was: alive? Or dead?

JULIA (STATEMENT)

Looking back, I feel like an idiot. I was watching them unload that same case. It was policy to have whoever was working security present for deliveries. Something about insurance. Thinking about it *(sigh)*, I even noticed Trevor lurking past the fence – though I didn't give much thought to just another tramp.

[TREVOR LAUGHS]

I had no idea what they had in the box, though. They told me it was new computer service, and I didn't have any reason *not* to believe

them. They'd had plenty of similar deliveries before.

Vardhan was there, and we talked for a while. He wanted to discuss the tennis, I think, but I've never really followed sport. He didn't seem suspicious or weird, and I had no reason to think that this was anything other than a late delivery of normal computer parts.

They took the case up to their offices, and I returned to my desk with a fresh cup of coffee, and a plan to dig him for the night with some episodes of an old radio show I was working my way through. The plan went pretty smooth for an hour or two, with the exception of a couple of DKN employees silently shuffling past at unnerving moments.

Then I happened to glance up at one of the video feeds, and saw that the tramp I saw earlier had managed to sneak inside the building.

TREVOR (STATEMENT)

(snort) It weren't as hard as all that! Didn't even need to break a window or nothing – just waited until the last of the office weirdos were heading back inside. They were slow enough, it were pretty simple to tail them through before the door swung shut.

Once in, I had to look for cameras, because I knew there were a security guard. I'd seen her when they were unloading, and were pretty sure I could take her out, if I needed to –

JULIA

(laugh) In your dreams, old man.

TREVOR (STATEMENT)

– but I didn't want it to come to that!

I tried to stay out of sight, but she must have spotted me, because soon enough I could hear her coming my way. I managed to duck into a stairwell and head up towards the fourth floor, where the front of the building said Darvish's company was.

I could hear her behind me, though, so I ducked out a floor early and nipped inside a cleaning cupboard to wait her out.

JULIA (STATEMENT)

I went all the way to the fourth floor, not realizing that this *git* wasn't up there. The corridor light was out, and I made a note to replace it later as I turned on my torch.

It was very quiet; far quieter than I would have expected for a company installing new equipment. I took a moment to get my bearings, and there was no sound at all. Utter silence, except for the faintest "drip, drip, drip" coming from somewhere up ahead. I called out, first for the trespasser, then for Vardhan, then for anybody who might be up there. But there was no answer.

My torch beam fell on the door labeled "DKN Systems." It stood open, unmoving, with no light at all coming from inside. As my light crossed the doorframe, I could see the windows had been covered with thick wooden boards, and painted a dark matte black.

In the corner of my mind, I could feel panic starting to claw its way up, as the darkness started to press in on me. I called out again, but there was still no reply.

I wanted to turn around and run back to the light, but not enough. Not as much as I wanted to overcome my fear.

I slowly headed inside, calling out every few steps to make sure anyone who might be in there knew I was with security.

Inside, the rooms were bare. Completely empty. There was no sign they'd ever been used to run a business, and the only sign that I wasn't the first person to set foot in there was the complete absence of dust or dirt. I checked another room, but it was exactly the same. The same with the third I checked, and the fourth.

Then I opened a normal-looking wooden door near the back. And I froze, once again on the threshold of something that didn't make sense.

In front of me was what should have been a normal meeting room, but it was far from that. The floor was covered in water, pitch-black and utterly still. I knew in my mind it couldn't be more than a few millimeters deep – it didn't even spread past the doorway when I opened it – but as my torch light reflected off the surface, it seemed to me like it was much, much deeper.

In the center of the room was a plain wood and metal table, with a man lying on top of it. I had never seen him before. He lay motionless, and I could make out a thin, dark trickle of liquid

flowing from his mouth and eyes over his face and dripping down the table legs into the dark water.

Three figures stood around him. The other workers from the office. Each was stood on a small square platform a few inches off the floor, facing directly towards the central table, arms outstretched and mouths wide as though they were screaming. They still made absolutely no sound.

I don't know how long I was frozen there, staring at the scene in front of me. Nothing was right about what I was seeing. I started to *scream* at them, shouted to stop whatever they were doing or I'd call the police. They didn't seem even remotely aware of me.

Finally, I decided I was going to leave – to make the call – but not before I got the man on the table out of there. He clearly needed help, and whatever these silent screamers were doing to him wasn't helping.

I told them. I announced what I was about to do, but still got no response. So I stepped into the room and over to the table.

As soon as my foot hit the water, I fell into it completely. It was colder than anything I had ever experienced, and the torch slipped from my hand as my vision immediately went dark.

I tried to orientate myself, to find which way was up, and I saw a faint pinprick of light as my torch sank away from me, down and down and down into the icy black water.

I started to panic then, with the lightless deep pressing in on me, eager to take me away. I was absolutely sure that in a few moments there would be no surface left. Just dark, still water forever.

TREVOR (STATEMENT)

Luckily, I'd been watching a while.

I saw her go down. Didn't have a clue what were going on – still don't – but I were quick enough to get there and reach me arm into the water before she were too far gone.

It were *bloody* cold. Couldn't see anything, obviously. I had my own light, but it just bounced off the surface. I could feel the back of her jacket down there, though, and I made a grab for it.

Now, I'm not as strong as I was, maybe, but I held on and pulled. Wasn't enough to get her out. Something in there didn't want to let her go. But I got her high enough that her arm broke the surface. She flailed a second, but got hold of the doorframe and started to pull herself out.

Took her a while, but she were almost there when I heard something moving behind us. Turned around to see Darvish stood there. And he did not look happy.

I were already holding the knife. I could smell him, so thick it tasted like rancid treacle. And whatever he was shouting was quieting the blood in my ears. It was gonna be good.

I got him once across the chest through his shirt, but he were a lot

faster than I gave him credit for. He cracked me once hard across the face. I didn't go down, but I didn't get him with the blade again before he slammed his elbow to me gut.

That time I did go down, and I dropped to the floor. He were on top of me, hands around me throat, and I thought that was it – no waiting for the cancer. I'm not gonna lie, I was scared.

JULIA

I could still feel that dark water sticking to me, tugging at me, pleading me to fall back into it.

I pushed it from my mind, and I could just about make out the homeless man that saved me. He was struggling with someone, his torch fallen to the ground next to an old pocketknife. I grabbed the light and pointed it at them. Vardhan was on top of him, hands around the old man's throat.

I saw those eyes properly, and for the first time I realized that Vardhan's irises weren't dark. It was just that the pupils were so wide that they swallowed them completely.

That wasn't what did it, though. That wasn't what made me pick up the struggling tramp's pocket knife and plunge it in again and again into Vardhan Darvish's throat.

No. What did that was the tattoo. Huge and dark on the chest beneath his rib shirt. The closed-eye sigil there was as familiar to me as the nightmares of my mother. I have never felt rage like I did

then, and I have never felt *anything* as wonderful as the satisfaction of *ending his life.*

There was a shiver in the air as the floor behind me dried in an instant, and the three silent screamers dropped down dead. Well, I suppose they might have just been unconscious when they fell. But they were definitely dead by the time we left. The man on the table had never been alive to begin with.

TREVOR

I just knew, then.

I never even had to explain anything to her. She just gave me back the knife and we left together.

Wasn't any question as to who I was or what I was doing.

We just clicked.

JULIA

Mm-hm. And we've been hunting together going on seven years now.

TREVOR

She ain't too bad at it.

JULIA

You're starting to slow down a bit, though.

TREVOR

(laugh) It's just the lack of respect that gets me.

JULIA

And he's going a bit senile, which is a shame.

TREVOR

Least I'm not so soft I need a featherbed.

JULIA

Beds are a good thing, old man! And I keep telling you – *so are baths.*

TREVOR

You see what I gotta put up with, Mr. Sims?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, um… *(nervous laugh)* Yeah… it's, uh… it's… what do you do for money?

JULIA

(annoyed) Sorry?

ARCHIVIST

I, I just, I-I doubt roaming around killing things pays all that well, What do you do to support yourselves?

JULIA

(exhale) Oh, I don't know, we find ways. When you're out here, the odd bit of robbery or trespass doesn't really faze you.

ARCHIVIST

And, uh, why America?

[RESIGNED SIGHS, LAUGHTER]

TREVOR

Heard tell there were a wolfman.

[JULIA LAUGHS AT HIM]

Old Davey – he's down in Plymouth – swore *blind* his brother had seen one on the Pacific Crest trail –

JULIA

I *told* Trevor he was a liar – but here we are anyway! Have been for a couple of years.

TREVOR

Hey, now, no wolfman, sure, but they're've been plenty out here that needs killing!

JULIA

(annoyed sigh) True enough. Plus, it's hard to leave. We're not exactly here legally, and trying to get a flight home would get us noticed by authorities we'd rather avoid.

TREVOR

I keep *telling* her we could hop a boat!

JULIA

And I tell *him* I'd rather stay hunting here than trap myself on a boat for two weeks.

ARCHIVIST

…s-so, what have you –

[MUSTERMANN WHEEZES AND STRUGGLES TO SPEAK]

MUSTERMANN

Sh-sh-shut uuuuuup…

TREVOR

Oh-ho, hey! Look who's talking!

[JULIA LAUGHS]

MUSTERMANN

(raspily, gasping) You could have at least chopped my ears off, too.

You people just won't shut up! Hhhhow am I supposed to get the *lungs* lined up right, when I can't even con-concentrate…

JULIA

I'm fit to chop them off again if you need the practice.

MUSTERMANN

(gasping) Dooooo it! You're the ones who want to talk.

ARCHIVIST

Why were you looking for me?

MUSTERMANN

(gasping) Wh-why do you think? Out here, exposed and unaware, on your own. At least I thought so. Thought it was a, a good chance to get you home, and get you ready for the dance.

JULIA

Is this that "Unknowing" dance?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, yeah… o-o-okay, uh, Mustermann, or whatever your name is –

MUSTERMANN

Just turn it off. You got more questions, then you turn that thing off!

ARCHIVIST

I don't think you're in any position to make demands.

MUSTERMANN

Maybe not, but are you sure you know what's listening in?

ARCHIVIST

Do you?

MUSTERMANN

No. But I don't like it.

TREVOR

What's he mean, "listening in?"?

ARCHIVIST

What – no, I, I, I'm not –

JULIA

I knew this was a bad idea. Turn it off.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, no, no, it's fine, it's –

JULIA

Turn. It. Off.

[CLICK]

MAG110 – Creature Feature

Statement #0121403

[CLICK]

MARTIN

Martin Blackwood, archival assistant at the Magnus Institute, recording statement number 0121403. Statement of Alexia Crawley, given March 14th, 2012.

Statement begins.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

It's hard to put my relationship with Dexter Banks into words. It was a complicated thing, built on well over a decade of disdain and interdependence. In many ways I was closer to him than his wife – not that I ever touched the odious little freak. And while those film obsessives that insist I basically directed all his films do us both a disservice, it is true that without me he would never have reached the fame and high regard he enjoys. Enjoyed.

"Cinematographer." Such an ornate term, yet still so vague. I often wonder if that's to blame for how overlooked we are as a profession. Or even worse, that dry title, "Director of Photography." But we are the true artists. A director may quite literally call the

shots, but it is the cinematographer that makes them. We choose the angles, the lighting, pretty much everything that you see on the screen. The camera is a brush, and we are the hand, the arm, the eye. The director's basically just the mouth, making pointless noise while the hand does the actual work. Almost every famous director that you know who has a distinctive visual style has simply managed to lock down a talented DoP.

I first worked with Dexter back in 1997, working as a cinematographer on *Red Ronin.* It feels odd to say now, but I was genuinely excited to work with him at the time. I'd seen some of his earlier work – *Wasteland 7, Dolores,* maybe a couple of shorts – and I remember thinking how refreshing it was going to be working with a director who really *got* film. Who was steeped in that history, and drew inspiration from forgotten corners of the medium. Even some corners that should have stayed forgotten.

Unfortunately, that turned out to be the *only* thing he understood. You see, Dexter Banks *lived* movies. As far as I could tell, every single aspect of his life had revolved around them. His dad had owned a small cinema near Fairfax Avenue, and as a teenager he'd bounced between working there and a small rental store that specialized in foreign films – specifically Italian horror movies and East Asian martial arts. I never met anyone who knew as much about films, and as little about anything else.

Working with him, it soon became clear that all he was interested in doing was recreating things he had seen. Taking scenes and music that he loved from those old, obscure corners of cinema and

then constructing whatever patchwork narrative would allow him to shoot his own versions of them. Whatever dialogue he didn't repurpose and had to write himself was stilted and slow. Trying to mirror the stylization that surrounded it, but failing utterly. I once mentioned to him the idea of working with a writer. I didn't do it again.

Red Ronin, for instance, was based on a Japanese film from the early 70s called *Blade of the Avenger.* It hit on the same dynamics and scenes as the original, but was set in modern-day Arizona following a nihilistic ex-marine in the fictional town of Funnel. It wasn't *strictly* a remake, though. Because Dexter would constantly call me into the screening room to show me some other samurai or Western that I'd never heard of, before jumping up at the appropriate scene and shouting, "that was it, we do that."

And I did. I'm very good at my job. I've been doing it almost 30 years now – five at the BBC before crossing the Atlantic – and I know exactly what I'm doing. Turns out that I have a talent for capturing the feeling of older movies, mirroring them while still keeping the shots fresh. Who cares if it bored me to creative tears – it was exactly the sort of bull that critics loved, and *Red Ronin* was the first of Dexter's films to get an Oscar nomination. Alhough it ended up losing out to *The English Patient.* Not really surprising, it was too genre for the Academy anyway.

I didn't realize it, but by that point I was already locked in with Dexter. I'd held some ambitions about directing myself one day, but it soon became obvious that that wasn't going to happen. Maybe if

I'd got a feature under my belt before I was outed as trans, it might have been different, but as it was, that revelation burned too many bridges. And when the dust had settled, it was made abundantly clear to me that I was never going to get a movie of my own, and it was either cinematography, or nothing.

So I stayed. I was in a bad place for the next couple years, and blindly accepted the DoP position on two more of Dexter's films: *Hell's Company* and *Leroy Slate.* Both were big hits, and by the time I properly felt myself again, I had ended up with my career so tied up in Dexter's that chasing other gigs wasn't really an option. I still have no idea how intentional it was on his part, but he was definitely aware that it was my work that elevated his films above simple homage. His periodic bouts of petty jealousy and snide bitterness had made that abundantly clear. Five years and three movies in, it was clear that we needed each other almost as much as we hated each other.

I don't know when he first mentioned his spider film. He didn't bubble out into a full obsession until two years ago, but I know he talked about it plenty before that. Whenever arguments over a project would last late into the night, and if he was very drunk, he'd get kind of quiet, and then he'd ask me, yet again, if I'd ever seen *Kumo Ga Tabeteiru.*

I think that was the name, anyway – something like that. He was normally slurring quite badly when he said it. He thought it translated to "The Spiders That Devour," but a Japanese friend once told me it was actually closer to just "spiders are eating."

According to Dexter, *Kumo* was an old tokusatsu movie, which he believed had come out sometime in the mid-to-late-60s. It was about a spider – just the one, despite the title – that grew to a colossal size and terrorized a small unnamed island off the coast of Kagoshima. What struck him about it, though, was the utter absence of anything resembling a hero or protagonist. No one fought against the monster. And although there were vignettes in the lives of those under the spider's shadow, they all ended the exact same way: with the character in question marching slowly and calmly into its waiting jaws.

Whenever Dexter described this, his eyes would widen and he'd start trying to recreate the sound that they made as they were eaten. He always claimed he wasn't doing it right, but the noises he ended up making were unsettling enough.

As far as either of us could determine, the film never existed. At least, not in any form that left a traceable record. Dexter had followed it up in a lot more detail than I had ever bothered to, and had checked with collectors of obscure film paraphernalia and long-defunct Japanese production studios. He actually showed a pretty surprising aptitude for the language. But it was just dead end after dead end. I ended up watching half a dozen different giant spider movies with him over our time together, and none of them were right. He'd just watch, muttering under his breath "no, no, no," and chewing on the back of his thumb.

It wasn't something I ever really minded. Of all the many and varied quirks of Dexter Banks, his minor obsession with a Japanese

spider movie that may or may not have ever existed was one of the least unpleasant. At least, until I got the call about his final project. He told me over the phone that he was producing a new film, that he was going to be his masterpiece. Then he started to describe it, and I don't know how much of what I felt was deja vu, and how much was just dread.

I asked if he had found a copy of the film, or the script, but he just laughed. "Better," he said. "I found the book it was based on."

Then he hung up, and I was left sitting there, feeling this gnawing apprehension that I just couldn't place. I realized what had disturbed me later. It was such a small thing, but it really nagged at me. It was the idea that Dexter would *ever* describe a book as better than a film. That sounds like I'm insulting him, but you need to know him to understand. Film was *everything* to him. Other media might as well not have existed.

Regardless, he went into production. He called it "Widow's Weave," and while the script pages he brought were apparently based on this unnamed book of his, the shots were drawn from his memories of the first film version. Assuming it existed anywhere outside of his head, of course. Part of me secretly assumed Dexter had simply dreamed the movie up and this book was… eh, it didn't matter. Not really. There wasn't any question about whether or not I was working on it. It was a Dexter Banks film! And my name was basically on the credits already.

The crew were mostly regulars he'd worked with before, but

weirdly for him, he seems to take almost no interest in casting at all. He asked Debbie Connor, our casting director, to get him as many no-name, untested hopefuls as the script needed. Bear in mind that at this point, any A-lister would have killed to be in a Dexter Banks picture. But he didn't care. For all he kept telling me about how this was his dream project that he was electrified to finally be making, he seemed to have almost entirely checked out of the process of actually making it.

There was one exception to this. He claimed to be working with Neil Lagorio to make the spider. Now, you might never have heard his name before, but I guarantee you you'll have seen his work. From the mid-70s right into CGI, Lagorio was the name in practical creature effects. Suit work, stop-motion, animatronics – whatever the method, he was the master. If you've watched any genre films at all from before 2005, there's basically no chance you haven't seen one of his creatures.

His early work was strictly horror, but in his prime he worked on basically any blockbuster that used practical effects for monsters or aliens. I'd had the pleasure of working with him way back in 1989 on *Orbit,* a medium-budget sci-fi vehicle for some aging action star. Neil was working on a 12-foot-tall animatronic robot that featured heavily in the climax. The picture was, unsurprisingly, a flop, but I still remember his work. How he brought a lump of wood and steel to life, the huge intricate mechanisms that allowed his crew to puppet it into motion that was so natural you could forget that the back of it was completely hollow.

Out of all of the odd changes with Dexter's behavior, his excitement over working with Neil Lagorio was the one thing that I shared with him. Not that I got a chance to do anything with that excitement. Once production started, Dexter became secretive and jumpy. He told us he'd set up a workshop for Lagorio and his team in one of the larger empty spaces on the lot. But no one except him was to go inside, or make any contact with the practical effects department.

It was odd, but everyone knew better than to argue. Once Dexter had an idea in his head, he would throw you off the set for trying to change it. When it really needed to happen, people generally looked to me to do so, since I was one they considered un-fireable. And this time, I did, saying that I'd worked with Neil before, and would love a chance to catch up with him. Dexter curtly explained that Neil had become reclusive in his retirement, and had only agreed to work on this picture on condition of absolute privacy. I didn't push the issue. It didn't seem like the battle to waste my energy on.

And there were certainly plenty more battles once shooting began. If you're wondering how easy it is to recreate shots that only exist in the hazy memory of an eccentric, or to frame scenes when you only get the typo-riddled script the morning before, I can tell you: not easy. Not easy at all. And Dexter's constant outbursts didn't help. Throwing people off the set over the smallest imagined offenses, or throwing away a whole day's shoot because "it just didn't feel right." We were burning through money and goodwill faster than I had ever seen, even on the most slapdash of his earlier projects.

The cast really impressed me, though. Most of them were fresh out of drama school, with maybe a couple of ads under their belt, and a few older faces who'd clearly spend most of their life hurling themselves at closed doors until now. Most impressive to me, though, was a guy called Brandon Omar. He was playing the closest thing the film had to a protagonist, a homeless ex-Methodist minister who'd found himself on the island by chance, and served as a connecting thread, wandering between the scenes and the vignettes of the inhabitants after each ended with their march to the spider.

Brandon took to the role immediately, with a gravity and a weariness that I don't think could have been entirely feigned. He was the only one who didn't seem excited by the movie, and spent his off hours smoking and reading quietly in one of the trailers. It was a shame, because for whatever reason, he also seemed to be the only one that Dexter would listen to. I only saw them talking once or twice, but every time, Dexter would be rapt, nodding at whatever Brandon might have to say.

Of course, I never really had time to think on it. I was finding it an almost impossible task to get even the most basic of shots, with Dexter constantly demanding the whole setup be changed for no reason. Like I said, I'm excellent at my job, but giving him what he wanted from the camerawork relied on him actually knowing it himself. There was a frenzied nervous energy to his instructions, and if I didn't know any better, I might have even said that he wasn't just afraid that the shots might not work, he was afraid of

the idea.

And so it was, for the first few weeks. Dexter clearly wasn't sleeping. He had insisted on using old equipment, and avoided digital almost entirely, to the point where several of the crew were using pieces of kit they'd never even seen before. This meant that a work print had to be made manually for the dailies, something he refused to let anyone else do. Once shooting wrapped, he'd be in the editing room for hours, preparing dailies, although they shouldn't have needed editing at all. And when we watched them, I'd often noticed that certain shots were missing, stuff I was certain that we'd filmed. I brought this up with him once, and he called me a liar to my face.

I only interrupted him when he was preparing dailies once. An actress who was slated to be shooting the next day had taken violently ill. The crew needed his sign-off to change the schedule. No one else dared to go in, so once again it was down to me to head into that tiny room alone.

It was dark inside, lit only by what spilled in through the open doorway. I could hear a sound like the turning of an old film reel, but I couldn't say where from. I stood there, unable to step inside, not because of fear, but because this space inside was threaded all over with film strips. Up and down, one side to the other, wrapping around and through each other. I gingerly reached out and touched one. And as I did, Dexter seemed to emerge from the darkness. At first I thought he was taller than usual, but then I realized that he was suspended ever so slightly by the strips of film, his feet a good

couple of inches off the floor.

He was very calm as he asked what I wanted, and when I stutteringly explained the situation, he just nodded and said we should feel free to rearrange however we liked. Then he closed the door, and I left. Trying very hard to convince myself that he had only had two arms.

Shooting continued, but there was a growing awareness throughout the crew that we had still seen nothing from Neil Lagorio. No one had met him on set, or spotted him or his team entering or leaving the workshop where the spider was supposedly being constructed. No one had heard the sound of work being done in there, and the rumor was that Dexter had finally lost it, and the workshop was empty. We had run through all the scenes that could be done without it, and everyone was getting really impatient.

Finally, Dexter announced it was time for the unveiling. For the spider, for *kumo,* to make its appearance. We were all excited as we assembled outside the workshop, but there was a nervous energy in the air that day. It was about as cold as it ever gets in LA, but the shiver that passed through us when he told us it was time was something else entirely.

Dexter told us the actors would see it first. He gave no reasoning for this, and silenced the outcry from a couple of the crew with a vicious glare. He then gathered up the cast and, with Brandon leading them, took them through a small door in the side of the workshop. And they disappeared inside.

I've thought back over those minutes so many times, trying to decide if I'd heard or seen anything that might have explained what happened inside that building. But in the end, I have to admit that I didn't. Minutes passed, then half an hour, as we waited impatiently for Dexter or the others to return.

It seems like a sick cosmic joke that that was the day the press broke the news of Neil Lagorio's death. Half an hour after the cast walked into that building, one of the grips stumbled across the news story whilst idly checking his phone. Lagorio had been privately suffering from Parkinson's for almost a decade, and had been bedridden in his Connecticut home for the last year.

We knew then that, whatever was going on inside that building, it was not Neil Lagorio debuting a new animatronic creation. Once again, all eyes turned to me.

I'm still not entirely sure what I saw on the other side of that door. I probably saw nothing, like the cops who arrived shortly afterwards. The place was entirely empty after all, just as the rumors had always said. But I wouldn't be here talking to you if I thought that was true, now, would I?

Because I remember that first moment – that instant of looking up when I first entered. I saw it, perfectly interwoven with a hundred cocoons, writhing and dangling, stretching out far above me. And in its center, those black and shining eyes that focused on my entrance. The legs that worked so fast as to be a blur. The fangs that dripped their poison onto Dexter Banks. Then, in a moment, it was

all gone – scuttling up and into nowhere, pulling its impossible web behind it.

I never knew how to describe my relationship with Dexter, and I still don't. How he was complicit, and how much he was simply caught in his own neuroses and fears, I don't know. I know he didn't deserve what happened to him.

I found the book, by the way. And I burned it. If I ever track down the man who used to own it, I might just burn him too.

MARTIN

Statement ends.

I think Alexia might be a bit too late for that. I mean, I think it sounds like a Jurgen Leitner book. About spiders. Hm. Good John didn't have to read this one, anyway. I know he's not a fan. Although, this one wasn't too bad, actually! I – yeah. Anyway.

This is, I suppose, one explanation for the disappearance of Dexter Banks, along with almost a hundred cast members, back in 2012. There's not a lot I can really add that hasn't been already dissected by a hundred different tabloid magazines and mystery shows. Even the, um, *arachnid* angle has been covered, as it seems that when *we* weren't a lot of help, Alexia Crawley told her *full* story to the press. She was not treated kindly, and refuses to discuss the events any further. Poor thing.

Yeah, but Basira did manage to get hold of a few things from recent

LAPD files that haven't been released to the public yet. Though she's a bit cagey as to how she got them.

Apparently, over the last five years, every February a corpse is found washed up on Redondo Beach. It'll be a shriveled husk, with all moisture and internal organs apparently removed. These corpses are usually unidentifiable, but the one that washed up last year was confirmed to be Chadwick Frazier, an aspiring actor who went missing in 2012, and whose IMDB page lists a final credit for *Widow's Weave.*

Um. Th-that's it.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

MARTIN

– no, that doesn't make sense! Can he even *do* that?

BASIRA

I don't know. I guess so.

MARTIN

So, what, he can just reach into your head and put something in there?!

BASIRA

I don't know. I guess so.

MARTIN

I mean. Does it even have to be a *true* thing? Do we, do we know for sure he's not *lying,* like, like *magically* lying?

BASIRA

I don't know.

MARTIN

Right, right, right. Sorry. I just – it's a lot to take in, you know.

BASIRA

Mostly for Melanie, yeah.

MARTIN

Oh, of course, yep. Sorry.

BASIRA

Look, *I'm* not the one you need – *[sigh]*

We can't just ignore it.

MARTIN

Well, yeah, but what do we – we didn't even *know* that that was

something he could *do!* What if there's other stuff he could do to us?!

BASIRA

We are *not* letting him get away with it.

MARTIN

I didn't *say* that.

BASIRA

Look, Martin. I know you care. I *know* you do. But *caring* isn't enough. You can't just stand next to someone with a cup of tea and *hope* everything's gonna be all right.

MARTIN

That's. Not. Fair. You don't even know me.

BASIRA

Prove it. We need to do something. Because if we just let him –

MARTIN

– oh, h-hi! Hey, hey Melanie, uh, can I get youuuu – a… cup… of… tea?

MELANIE

So, she told you, then?

BASIRA

We need everyone, if we're gonna have any chance.

MELANIE

Right.

MARTIN

What about Tim?

MELANIE

Tim is…

BASIRA

Elias is watching him too closely.

MELANIE

He's probably watching me, too.

MARTIN

We could, uh, we could try the tunnels! John says they might help!

MELANIE

Right.

BASIRA

Or maybe… when he's not paying attention. Distracted, like during

your, um, your performance review.

MELANIE

Wait, what do you mean?

MARTIN

Yeah, what?

BASIRA

Well, I was heading out, and Martin, you remember you knocked over that huge stack of papers?

MARTIN

I, I, they shouldn't have been there in the first place! Besides, *I* cleaned them up!

BASIRA

But not in the right order. And when I brought them up to Elias yesterday, he asked why they were messed up.

MARTIN

Y… You didn't tell him it was me…?

BASIRA

That's not the point, Martin. The point is –

MELANIE

He wasn't watching you. He was *busy*.

BASIRA

Yep.

MARTIN

Hang on…

BASIRA

Not here. The tunnels.

MARTIN

Right, right, right.

[PAUSE]

MARTIN

[voice echoing in the tunnels] Melanie, I'm, I'm really sorry you… I'm just sorry.

MELANIE

[voice echoing in the tunnels] Yeah…

[CLICK]

MAG111 – Family Business

Statement #0173006

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Right, so I just… read it?

JULIA

He's the last page.

TREVOR

[Snorts] Good luck. I guess.

ARCHIVIST

Ah, you're not staying to… I dunno, keep an eye on me?

JULIA

It's not a… Trevor doesn't like using the book. I don't either. Makes me feel off. Dead should stay dead.

ARCHIVIST

S-So… I mean, why keep it around?

TREVOR

‘Cause sometimes talking to the dead can stop you joining ‘em. Come on Julia.

JULIA

Ah, just give us a knock when you’re done.

ARCHIVIST

Sure.

[DEPARTING FOOTSTEPS]

Sure…

[DOOR CLOSES]

[STILLNESS SAVE FOR THE NORMAL BACKGROUND CHIRP OF INSECTS]

Right… *[Exhales]*

Okay.

[DEEP BREATH]

“His consciousness faded in and out like the tide. He tried to refuse their drugs, though for what purpose even he could not have said.

Perhaps he was simply trying to push away the smell of disinfectant and grief that rose from his hospital bed. She was there sometimes, the one he had followed around the world. There was almost sadness in her eyes. He felt himself begin to slip, the icy certainty of what was happening seeping through his flesh, and as he fell away for the final time, he felt that all-consuming fear. And his only thought was to cry out for his mother. But with the last vestige of his stubborn will, he refused. *She* would not claim his last moment. He was silent.

[OMINOUS RUMBLE WITH A SIDE OF CRACKLING RISES TO CRESCENDO]

And so Gerard Keay ended."

Gerard? Gerard Keay?

GERARD

You're new. Did you kill them?

ARCHIVIST

Uh… who?

GERARD

The Hunters. They had this book. Are they dead?

ARCHIVIST

N-No.

GERARD

Then *piss off*. I told them I'm not talking.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, what?

GERARD

[Tired] I'm not their bloody *Monster Manual.* I'm done.

ARCHIVIST

I-I-I didn't – I mean, that's not what this is.

GERARD

No? They didn't hand me over for you to use, like I'm a bloody dictionary wrapped in a special box?

ARCHIVIST

Uh… Yeah.

GERARD

Like I said.

…

You got a cigarette?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, oh, yeah. Here. C-Can you smoke it?

GERARD

Ugh. I guess not.

…

Yeah…

…

Nice lighter. You a spider freak, then?

ARCHIVIST

What? Oh! Er, no. I-I never really, uh… I never really thought of it. I-I'm John. I'm with the Magnus Institute.

…

I-I'm the Archivist.

…

GERARD

When did she die?

ARCHIVIST

About a year after you did.

GERARD

Was it peaceful?

ARCHIVIST

…

No.

GERARD

Good. Don’t think she would have wanted that.

God, I can’t imagine her dying in bed.

…

So you’re the new guy, then? Following in her footsteps?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, some of them. They… don’t exactly lead where I thought they would.

GERARD

Yeah, she was like that.

ARCHIVIST

I-I’m trying to stop the Unknowing.

GERARD

[Exhales] She didn't manage it, then?

ARCHIVIST

Not before she, uh… I need your help.

GERARD

[Snorts] Do you now?

ARCHIVIST

She thought she'd found a-a way to stop it. I think. If anyone knows what that was, it's you.

GERARD

…

No.

ARCHIVIST

What? W-Why not? If, if it happens, if the Circus –

GERARD

Yeah, the world changes in horrible ways. For **you**. I'm a book.

ARCHIVIST

You can't be serious.

GERARD

I'm dead serious.

[GHOSTLY CHUCKLE]

It *hurts.* Being like this. And it's not like any pain you can feel when you're alive. It's… it hurts to exist. To be dead and still **here**. And those two want to keep me like this, so I can answer questions about their Dracula of the week. So no. Help me, or you go to your little apocalypse with nothing.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. What do you want?

GERARD

I want to go away. I want you to take my page and burn it.

ARCHIVIST

I-I-I can't do th– They'd know! They'd kill me.

GERARD

Tear it out and take it, then. Do it somewhere else.

ARCHIVIST

B-B-But if they check the book –

GERARD

Guess you better hope they don't.

ARCHIVIST

Gerard, please…

GERARD

You want answers, you tear out my page now! So I know you can't back out.

ARCHIVIST

…

[Deep sigh] Okay.

GERARD

Okay.

ARCHIVIST

[Exhales] Ready?

[GERARD INHALES, SUPPRESSING THE PAIN, OVER THE SOUND OF FIBRES RIPPING]

There.

GERARD

Thank you.

ARCHIVIST

Well, you've probably killed me.

GERARD

Dying isn't so bad. It's staying dead that sucks.

ARCHIVIST

Well, these nuggets of wisdom are certainly worth it so far.

GERARD

Relax. They won't notice.

ARCHIVIST

So?

GERARD

Okay, you got questions.

ARCHIVIST

Just one. How do I stop the Unknowing?

GERARD

[Casually] No, I don't know.

ARCHIVIST

[Incensed] What?!

GERARD

Oh, okay, okay, I don't know *exactly,* but… me and Gertrude went all over, tracking clowns and skinwalkers, trying to find a way to mess it up. I didn't find much, but Gertrude, she figured a few things out. She reckoned it could be *delayed,* but nothing we could do beforehand would actually stop it properly. Even the Dancer could be replaced. But, once it starts, then it might be vulnerable.

ARCHIVIST

Vulnerable to what?

GERARD

I dunno.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, goddamn it!

GERARD

But she did say she thought she had something that could do it.

ARCHIVIST

What?

GERARD

Well, not long before I ended up in the hospital, she told me that if something got her first, I was… There's a storage unit on an

industrial estate up near Hainault. She said she rented it under the name Jan Kelly, and hid a key for it somewhere in the Archives.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Uh, I-I think I found that.

GERARD

Well, it's in *that* storage unit. Whatever she thought might disrupt the ritual, stop the Unknowing, that's where it'll be.

ARCHIVIST

But you don't know what it is?

GERARD

No. When I asked her, she said she'd show me when we got back to London. Mind you, she had this weird look in her eyes, like it was some kind of a joke.

ARCHIVIST

I mean… it wasn't, w-was it? A-A joke.

GERARD

I don't think so. Gertrude didn't make jokes.

ARCHIVIST

Well, worst-case scenario I suppose I… continue to have nothing.

GERARD

I guess.

…

So… uh, you're the Archivist now?

ARCHIVIST

Whatever that means.

GERARD

Can't help you much there. Gertrude was always kind of cagey about it.

ARCHIVIST

Sh-She never showed any… er, abilities, or talked about… I don't know, destiny? Like she was… b-becoming something?

GERARD

Hmmm… Well, she could make people tell her stuff, sometimes. They'd suddenly get real talkative, and lay out whatever she needed. She didn't do it often though. I don't think she liked it.

ARCHIVIST

[Perky] Oh, er, I can do that, too.

GERARD

Huh. Do you like it?

ARCHIVIST

I-I don't know. I never really thought about it.

Yes, I… I suppose I do.

GERARD

Hmmm.

ARCHIVIST

Did she read statements?

GERARD

Sometimes. If she was getting shaky. They perked her up, I think. Feeding the Eye, you know? I'd sometimes hear her through the wall, just reading into the air, feeling it all.

ARCHIVIST

She… she didn't use a tape recorder?

GERARD

Not when I was with her. She travelled light. Left things behind.

ARCHIVIST

Kind of sounds like you didn't… trust her.

GERARD

Yeah, I didn't. I wanted to, I really did, but it was *always* the work. Sometimes she just reminded me of my mum.

Did you ever meet her, my mum?

ARCHIVIST

[Flustered] Erm… Not in, not in person, it was er… O-Only by reputation.

GERARD

Huh. Well, she was also, um, 'goal-orientated'. Ruthless. But at least Gertrude tried to do something worthwhile with it. My mum only had her ambitions. She'd never have even admitted it, though. She was too proud for that. She saw herself as real working class, always said the occult was just a club for rich boys playing politics with things they didn't understand. Reckoned her tradition was less the academic and more the, uh…

ARCHIVIST

V-Village witch?

GERARD

[Laughingly] You sure you don't know her?

Yeah. But deep down what she wanted wasn't all that different from the ivory tower idiots she hated. Y'know, I think, secretly, she

dreamed of starting a little mystic dynasty of her own. With me.

ARCHIVIST

Like the, the Lukases? Or the Fairchilds?

GERARD

Well, Fairchild's just a name, they're not really family. The Lukases, though, yeah. Thing is, it's harder than it looks. What's out there… doesn't care about blood.

ARCHIVIST

Well, I-I mean, except for the vampires…

GERARD

Yeah, *obviously* except for the vampires. But they care about your choices, your fears, not your parents. Families are just useful 'cause they can push you in the right direction. And the Lukases are very good at that.

ARCHIVIST

And I imagine they're not… reluctant to remove any members that might put that legacy at risk.

GERARD

Right. You know, for a group that worships a power of loneliness, they never seem to have any problems breeding, or finding spooky

singles to marry them. Just one of those things, I guess. But most times you try to put your descendants on the path to worship, it doesn't go great. Just takes one stubborn heir to freak out about the truth, and the whole thing comes crashing down.

ARCHIVIST

And… that was you?

GERARD

Yeah. Turns out not everyone grows up caring about power and knowledge like my mum.

ARCHIVIST

What happened?

GERARD

I tried to abandon her.

ARCHIVIST

I see.

Do you… want to make a statement?

[GERARD GIVES A SMALL LAUGH]

GERARD

Why not? I'll try to make it quick, before the Van Helsings get bored.

ARCHIVIST

Right. *[Cough]* Right.

Er… Statement of Gerard Keay, deceased, regarding the death of his mother, Mary Keay. Statement taken posthumously from subject, June 30th, 2017.

Statement begins.

GERARD (STATEMENT)

My mum spent her whole life feeling cheated.

She used to tell me with a kind of sneer that "destiny is for lords", and I think in her own way she actually believed that. You know, she felt we weren't important enough for a destiny. But she never forgot that she came from a noble house: Von Closen. All wrapped up in mystery and power. At least, that's what my mum believed. I was never able to find much on them, at all. Nothing that would say there was anything special about them except, y'know, maybe their connection to the Magnus Institute and Jonah Magnus. But **she'd** never accept that. To her, her ancestors were these 'powerful sages of terrible gods', their 'destinies stolen from them by an idle dilettante'. *[Snorts]* Least that's how she told it to me.

I remember that Jurgen Leitner was the first *man* I ever really hated. I'd never met him, but that was the name on the books that

my mum spent all her time reading, and half the time when she actually looked at me, it was to teach me about one of *them.* She idolised him, I think, almost as much as she despised him. She thought he'd managed what she always dreamed of: using these entities, without being bound to them. I think she saw him as some kind of sorcerer. So she studied those books that she could find, but she always came back to this one, this unnamed catalogue of the trapped dead. It was her first, she always told me, and would probably be her last.

I never knew my dad. Not really. He worked in the Archives like you, but quit once I was born. I think he wanted to help raise me. But mum didn't need the help, and after me she wasn't able to have kids again, so she killed him in his sleep to practice her bookbinding. I guess she failed. I always thought he was in *here,* but when I eventually got hold of it, there wasn't a page in there.

She did her best to look after me, and bring me into this world she inhabited, but she wasn't a caring mother or a skilled teacher. My struggling at her lessons infuriated her. I mean, looking back now I can see that her knowledge was basic at best. But I was a kid. I could only try to avoid her temper, and learn my weird lessons, writing out nonsense, and pretending I understood paradoxes that most adults couldn't handle.

We travelled a lot. Between her day job as a rare bookseller and her… vocation, it wasn't often we stayed in London for more than a month. We met with things that almost made me throw up, I was so afraid, and she'd talk to them like old friends. It was awful, but I

suppose in many ways, it worked. Whenever I tried to run away the 'real' world seemed so… ignorant I could never be a part of it. So I did my best to find my place within my mum's world. As an idiot teenager I hunted Leitner's books with the best of them, even found a few. I'd bring them home, and watch her eyes light up. But it was always the books that she was happy to see.

Eventually, I grew old enough and wise enough to see her obsession for what it really was: hubris. She lived just carefully enough not to be destroyed by things she studied, but that was it. The things out there, they weren't like taming fire, they couldn't be contained or used for light or warmth. The best you could hope for from them, would be that they don't spot you, and instead my mum chased after them, obsessed with others who had tried to stare at them without being blinded: y'know, Flamsteed, Smirke, Leitner. Idiots who destroyed themselves chasing a secret that wasn't worth knowing. And the worst thing was, she marked me as a part of that, without my understanding. Or consent.

Our relationship, such as it was, it quickly went downhill. But I never managed to leave. I just couldn't bring myself to finally cut that cord and abandon her, no matter what she said. And I think she *knew* that. I think she knew she had me trapped. But it was a hollow victory. She also knew that I wouldn't continue her work, that whatever destiny she had tried to write for the Von Closen line, died with her. I think that might have been what finally pushed her to do it. To try and take full control of the book.

I remember the smell when I came back to the shop that day, the

heavy blood smell. She had just finished writing on the third sheet she'd hung on that old fishing wire, laced between the shelves, and she was on the edge of passing out. She wouldn't stop, though. She wouldn't give in. She thrust a razor blade and a marker pen at me, and begged me to help her finish. Everything was red, every possible shade of dark, and wet, and drying crimson. I turned to run but I slipped, fell to the floor and I crawled, panicking, down into the street. I managed to stagger to a coffee shop across the road, and I just sat there in shock until the police arrived.

Between the blood on my clothes, eyewitnesses who saw me leaving, and the fact the mutilations were so awful the judge said it was "inconceivable to suggest they were self-inflicted", it seemed like an open-and-shut case. And honestly, there was a part of me which thought a life in prison was an alright price for freedom. Trouble was, whatever ritual my mum tried to do? It worked. She had bound herself to the book, and was able to manifest almost at will. How she removed it from police custody I don't know, but it left enough of the other evidence 'contaminated' that my case was judged a mistrial. I was later told there wasn't enough evidence to charge me again. Apparently, several witnesses had withdrawn their testimony. I wasn't going to be imprisoned, but… I was a long way from free.

She was waiting for me when I got home. The half-finished ritual had left her… damaged. She was powerful, but… erratic. Of course she blamed me for her new state, said if I had helped her she would have been completely beyond death. But as she was, she wasn't

going anywhere.

For the next *five years* she haunted my life. I did what she asked, but whenever her form faded for a few days, I would take what little revenge I could: I burned books, I covered leads. I occasionally fled to somewhere I thought it'd be hard for her to follow.

And in the end, it was Gertrude who saved me. She came to me when I was desperate, nowhere to go, and she offered to help. I just had to make sure I took the book while my mum was fading, and brought it to her, and then she would free me. I didn't really believe her, I don't think, but I did it anyway. When she returned the book to me a week later, her pages burned and mangled, I think I actually cried with relief.

I never even considered that my mum might have taught Gertrude how to make pages for it before she was destroyed.

[Sigh] I think you know the rest. I joined Gertrude's work for a few years. Didn't realise how ill I was until it finally caught up with me. Then I died.

I think… I think I finally understand why she brought me back. I just don't understand why she left me behind.

ARCHIVIST

What was Gertrude's work?

GERARD

What?

ARCHIVIST

I-I mean, I – Sorry, I-I know a lot about what Gertrude *did,* but I don't really know… why she was doing any of it, or w-what her intentions were.

GERARD

Same as you. I think.

ARCHIVIST

Stopping the Unknowing?

GERARD

Not just the Unknowing. All of them.

ARCHIVIST

There are more rituals…

GERARD

That's what she said.

ARCHIVIST

W-W-What do they do?

GERARD

I mean… they change the world. They make it new.

ARCHIVIST

An apocalypse.

GERARD

Kind of.

How much *do* you know about these things, the Eye and that?

ARCHIVIST

I don't – Uh… they're, they're malicious. Many consider them god-like and t-they have the power to affect the world in unnatural ways, but they cannot directly exist within it, so they rely on avatars or, or servants that they corrupt and… sometimes monsters that they create. They use their power in ways small enough to stay hidden, a-and I think… I think they feed on our fear.

GERARD

No, they don't *feed* on it. They *are* it.

ARCHIVIST

What? W-what do you mean?

GERARD

I mean what I said. These things, these *forces,* they *are* our fear. Deep fears. Primordial. Always looking for ways to grow and

spread.

ARCHIVIST

No… B-B-But that doesn't – I m-mean, it doesn't make –

GERARD

What? So you thought it was coincidence that unknowable alien consciousnesses from beyond our universe just so happen to basically be all the things we're terrified of?

ARCHIVIST

I – How?!

GERARD

No idea.

Smarter people than me have died trying to figure *that* one out. I mean, maybe they appeared out of nothing the first time something felt afraid. Maybe they're older than that, and they just got inspired by all the things that we dread. Did they make themselves from our fears, or are they why we're afraid? I really don't know.

ARCHIVIST

But, but not everything they do inspires fear.

GERARD

And if you're having an omelette for lunch, not every moment is

spent eating the omelette. Some things take preparation. Especially if, you know, your spatula has a bit of free will. And sometimes I think bits of them just… ooze into the world without any purpose at all. Or sometimes they're summoned.

ARCHIVIST

Fears change. Fears are-are-are cultural.

GERARD

A lot of them, yeah, but others are deeper than that. And when our fears change, so do these things. But it's not quick. Gertrude reckons they've basically been the same since the Industrial Revolution. She and my mum both liked to follow Smirke's list of fourteen.

ARCHIVIST

[Disbelievingly] Th– I mean, there are a lot more than fourteen things to be afraid of in the world. Where do you draw the line?

GERARD

Hmmm.

I always think it helps to imagine them like colours. The edges bleed together, and you can talk about little differences: "oh, that's indigo, that's more lilac", but they're both purple. I mean, I guess there are technically infinite colours, but you group them together into a few big ones. A lot of it's kind of arbitrary. I mean, why are navy blue and sky blue both called blue, when pink's an entirely

different colour from red? Y'know? I don't know, that's just how it works.

And like colours, some of these powers, they feed into or balance each other. Some really clash, and you just can't put them together. I mean, you *could* see them all as just one thing, I guess, but it would be pretty much meaningless, y'know, like… like trying to describe a… *shirt* by talking about the concept of colour.

O-Of course, with these things it's not a simple spectrum, y'know, it's more like –

ARCHIVIST

An infinite amorphous blob of terror bleeding out in every direction at once.

GERARD

Now you're getting it.

ARCHIVIST

Like colours, but if colours hated me. Got it. Christ, I need a cigarette.

GERARD

Yeah, well, you can wait. Don't know how much longer we have.

ARCHIVIST

Hang on, if *these* entities are all based on our, on our *fear,* the-the-then what, what about the, the rest –

GERARD

No. There aren't any god-like powers of hope, or love, or indigestion, or whatever. At least not that I've seen. Just fear. I don't know why.

ARCHIVIST

Fine.

So… so, I know a, a few… but what are they, these fourteen?

GERARD

[Recites] "Robert Smirke divided the beings into fourteen distinct Powers, each comprising a variety of smaller terrors, some direct and practical, and some more abstract."

ARCHIVIST

R-r-right. I know The Eye. Fear of being watched, right?

GERARD

Being watched, being followed, having your deepest secrets exposed. Needing to know, even if your discoveries might destroy you. The feeling that something, somewhere, is letting you suffer, just so it can watch.

ARCHIVIST

Is… is that me? Is… is that what I do?

GERARD

You're the Archivist, you tell me.

ARCHIVIST

Ah…

Ah.

The Spiral is the fear of madness, right? That worry that your world isn't right, th-that your mind is lying to you?

GERARD

Yeah, pretty much.

ARCHIVIST

And The End is fear of death.

GERARD

Simple, but always there.

ARCHIVIST

The Stranger is the, the unknown. The uncanny.

GERARD

That kind of creeping sense that something's not right. That guy you saw that might be following you, might mean you harm.

ARCHIVIST

Isolation.

GERARD

Smirke called it The Lonely. The feeling that you're just… alone. Maybe there's no-one else there at all, maybe you just can't connect.

ARCHIVIST

Then there's… burning, the, uh, the Lightless Flame.

GERARD

The Desolation. Fear of pain, fear of loss, fear of unthinking or cruel destruction.

ARCHIVIST

Does it… watch over, um, war as, as well? Or is, is that The End?

GERARD

I mean, I think they both get a lot out of war, but you're thinking of The Slaughter. It's not cruel, exactly, or unstoppable like The End. It's just pure violence, not targeted or premeditated, just… unpredictable violence. And you don't know when, or if it's even coming. Sometimes it's aggressive, like a frenzied killer, but

sometimes it's calm, like an army firing shells into a village. The Slaughter's not that common in peace but, well, you know, there's always a war somewhere.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

And, and then th-there's, uh… Vertigo. The fear of, the fear of falling.

GERARD

The Vast. Vertigo, agoraphobia, the dread of deep water, of our own insignificance before the universe.

ARCHIVIST

And on the other side, claustrophobia?

GERARD

The Buried. Small spaces, crushing, you can't breathe. You're at the centre of everything, and it all pushes down on you. If the Vast is like losing yourself in too much space, the Buried is being trapped without enough.

ARCHIVIST

Darkness?

GERARD

The Dark, yeah. That's an old one, and one of the deepest. I mean, who isn't a little bit afraid of the dark? Of what might be in it?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. And there, um… I think Filth, it's, it's disease, but also insects?

GERARD

The Corruption. Ooh, it's a nasty one, that one. Just… disgust. Rot, decay, infection. That feeling of your skin crawling or itching, being touched by something that might burrow inside you. Swarming and hollowing you out. Leaving you full of holes.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. Not spiders, though?

GERARD

No. They belong to The Web.

ARCHIVIST

Which is… spiders a-and control. Your, your will not being your own.

GERARD

Yeah. Being manipulated or puppeted. The worry you're caught in a trap you can't see.

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

…

What about meat? How does that work?

GERARD

Ah, The Flesh?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, I-I mean, are we really so afraid of being… eaten? Of our bodies being all twisted up, i-i-is that… I mean, some people sure, but… how is it one of the fourteen great fears?

GERARD

What? You think people are so special it's only our fear that counts?

ARCHIVIST

Wh– No…

GERARD

Everything feels afraid sometimes. Sure, maybe it's not as complicated or… existential as our fear, but it's real. And there's, what, twenty billion chickens in the world? A few billion pigs, cows… How many of *them* are dying of old age? All that terror, it has to go somewhere. So it does.

ARCHIVIST

And when something formed out of an animalistic fear of the slaughterhouse reaches out to, to people…

GERARD

Things get weird. Yeah. It gets mixed all up with human neuroses: bodies, gore, y'know, that nagging worry that deep down we're just electrified meat squeezing air at each other.

ARCHIVIST

Good lord.

GERARD

I think it's quite new. Only just beginning its, uh, ascendance when Smirke labelled it. Before that there just weren't enough animals for it to be a fear of its own. Back then I think the only animal fear was The Hunt.

ARCHIVIST

The Hunt is also animals?

GERARD

Yeah. Been a long time since humans had any proper sense of our place on the food chain. I mean, we haven't been 'prey' for, what, thousands of years?

ARCHIVIST

But, I mean, hunting, killing each other. That-That's just how wild animals work. I-I-It's… natural.

GERARD

So's death. But we're still afraid of it.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose. And again, when an animalistic fear touches a human…

GERARD

You get the Predator's granddad out there.

ARCHIVIST

[Considering] This is, uh…

No, I don't have time. Tell me about the rituals.

GERARD

Well, they all have one. Most of them, anyway. Takes centuries to build up to a level of power where they can try it, and if they fail, it's back to square one.

ARCHIVIST

Okay, but what do the rituals do?

GERARD

They… kind of ‘shift’ the world, just enough for the Power to come through. Merge with reality. Some say, or well, they guess, that it could bring other entities through with them. I mean, I doubt The Buried would be bringing through The Vast, but you know.

ARCHIVIST

But what does that actually mean. F-For the world? ‘Merging with reality’?

GERARD

Okay, well… You know how I was just talking about the Hunt and the Flesh?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

GERARD

Well, think of it this way: right now all the entities have to act like a hunter, they pick off the weak ones around the edges, the ones that wander too close, and the rest of the time they have to just graze on whatever fear we all passively give away.

ARCHIVIST

And if one of the rituals succeeds?

GERARD

The world becomes a factory farm.

ARCHIVIST

…

Why would anyone want that? I-I mean, there are people, or they used to be people, who are trying to do this. Why?

GERARD

I dunno. Power, maybe? Or they've just got close enough to their patron or whatever that they also feed on it. I guess maybe some people just have a weird relationship with fear.

ARCHIVIST

And Gertrude wanted to stop them.

At any cost.

GERARD

She worked out they'd all be happening quite close together. She'd already been doing it a while. And the Unknowing was the next on her list. That and the Watcher's Crown.

ARCHIVIST

The what?

GERARD

Uh, the Rite of the Watcher's Crown. It's what she called the ritual for the Eye. She didn't tell me much about that one, just that she knew how to take care of it. To be honest, when she was going through *this* stuff, that was about the time I thought I had found Leitner, so I wasn't much in the mood to listen.

ARCHIVIST

Leitner?

GERARD

Yeah. Gertrude reckoned he was alive somewhere.

Said she thought she'd found him. I tracked him down, but it… well, it wasn't him.

ARCHIVIST

Y-You're sure?

GERARD

It was just some pathetic old man. Couldn't have been him. He was so scared of me, I just… just let him go.

ARCHIVIST

Are you alright?

GERARD

I think… I think I'm ready to go. I'm done. Hide my page, and when

you're out of here, burn it.

Please.

ARCHIVIST

I will. Thank you, Gerard.

GERARD

Gerry.

ARCHIVIST

What?

GERRY

Gerard was what my mum called me. *[Embarrassed chuckle]* I always wanted my friends to call me Gerry.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you, Gerry. Uh… I dismiss you.

[RELIEVED SIGH AND STATIC]

Oh.

Alright.

[CLOSES BOOK AND CLEARS THROAT]

I'm ready!

[FOOTSTEPS & DOOR OPENS]

TREVOR

All done?

ARCHIVIST

I… Yeah. I-I think so.

TREVOR

I'll get it back in the box.

[FOOTSTEPS DEPARTING WITH BOOK]

JULIA

Did he tell you what you needed?

ARCHIVIST

I don't – Maybe. He told me… a lot.

JULIA

Yeah, he does that.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, I-I feel like I knew so most of it, but…

JULIA

Hearing it all laid out, right? Like a punch to the gut.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

JULIA

You need a drink?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[FOOTSTEPS]

JULIA

You find anything about the Stranger? Stopping that… The Unknowing?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, er, I think so. I hope so.

[LIQUID SOUNDS]

JULIA

So, what's our next move?

[FOOTSTEPS]

ARCHIVIST

Well, mine's a flight back to London. I-I-I think you said that would be a problem for you, you two?

JULIA

Yeah. To be honest, if this thing is as soon as you think it's gonna be, and back in England? Well, I'm not sure how much 'elp we can be.

ARCHIVIST

You've already done… so much more than enough.

JULIA

Yeah well, you brought us Max Mustermann's head. I think we're going to have a lot fun with that. Plus, if you *do* save the world…

ARCHIVIST

I suppose we'll call it even.

JULIA

More or less.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you, Julia. I mean it.

JULIA

Well, it's just killing monsters really, isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

How about that drink?

[CLICK]

MAG112 – Thrill of the Chase

Statement #0111311

[CLICK]

BASIRA

Okay…

[EXHALED BREATH]

[Adopts 'Archivist voice'] Statement of Lisa Carmel, regarding –

[Normal voice] No. Statement of Lisa Carmel, regarding her involvement in a series of murders. Statement number 0111311, 13th November, 2011. Basira Hussain recording.

Statement begins.

BASIRA (STATEMENT)

Okay, I know how it sounds, but Murder Club wasn't supposed to be like this. It was just true crime stuff. My boyfriend, well, ex-boyfriend, used to call it my "serial killer fan club", which I'll admit doesn't make it sound a lot better, but you've gotta believe there was no way any of us would have *chosen* to get involved in

anything like what's happening.

Except, I guess, that we did. Somehow.

I'm not a violent person, not at all. My sisters used to play-fight when we were kids, and I'd always just… I'd end up crying in the corner. But for some reason, true crime never had that effect on me. Or maybe it did, but I kind of liked it when I could control it. I remember when I first got the taste. I stumbled across a book on famous murders that had somehow ended up in our school library. I read about Lizzie Borden, feeling the breath catch in my throat, and I put the book away quickly before literally running out of the library. I didn't sleep at all that night, but I still went back to that book the next day.

It's always scared me. That's the thing. I could never get into horror; ghosts and monsters always left me bored. Even thrillers never really got me in the same way. But there was just a part of me that always knew it wasn't real, it never happened. But true crime? The awful stuff that humans do to one another? That got me. I used to think it was about facing the darkness, and coming to terms with my fear, or somehow honouring the victims, but it's not. It's just that there's a part of me that gets an awful little buzz from it. From that shudder that goes through my body when I'm getting all the gory details of how someone died at the hands of a real-life human monster. Books, podcasts, documentaries, I… I went through all of them all, and still wanted more. And then I found Murder Club.

Well, it's more that I **founded** Murder Club. Co-founded, at least.

And Murder Club wasn't an official name or anything, it's just what we called it. We all met through one of those meetup websites, I-I forget which one. It was about three years ago, and I'd just moved to London, so… I tended to trawl a bunch of them to try and find things to do, places I might make some new friends. This one was advertised as the first meeting of a "True Crime Discussion and Reading Group", and as you might have guessed by now, that was right up my street.

We met up, had a great time discussing a book on Tillie Klimek, and decided to make it a regular event. Pretty soon Murder Club was meeting up every other week. A few of us wanted to do it weekly, but Jamie was a slow reader and didn't think he could keep up. We'd occasionally all see each other outside the regular meetings if we were watching a new documentary together or something like that. Once, we even went on a day trip to the True Crime Museum in Hastings.

Let's see, at the moment it's me, Jamie Sanders, Ananya Kaleka, who we were all founding members, and then there's Ananya's wife Evelyn, Andrew Cochrane, who I invited him from work, and Debbie Truss, who joined us about a year ago, but… I don't remember where from. There used to be more, but people… come and go. So, six of us at the moment. Well, I suppose three. Evelyn, Jamie and Debbie are already dead, so I don't know how much you'd call them 'current members', but you know what I mean.

I really don't know how it all happened. This 'jump' from morbid book club to actual murder came so quickly. This time last week I

was finishing up a memoir by a retired FBI profiler, getting ready for Murder Club the next evening; now I'm here, trying to explain things to you in case the others get to me. Probably putting you in danger as well, to be honest, so… sorry about that.

That was the meeting where everything went wrong. It was at my flat – I technically only have a room, with the rest of the place shared between a rotating cast of whatever international students and burnouts my landlord rents to. But that night I had the flat mercifully to myself. I opened the windows to let out the smell of smoke, turned on a small space heater to help with the chill, and laid out a couple of bottles of wine that I bought special.

Jamie turned up first, as usual. He has an obvious crush on me, but he's also about ten years older than I am – *was* ten years older – and I just wasn't into him. Still, he was nice enough company, and we'd usually chat until the others arrived. Ananya and Evelyn were next, and then Debbie. Andrew was late, but it was because he'd been whiskey shopping, which he explained was apparently a thing, and he was in a sharing mood, so we managed to forgive him. We all had our little pre-club catch-up, talking about life and work and the state of the world, and we were just about to dive into the main discussion, when there was another knock at the door.

[KNOCKING AT THE DOOR]

BASIRA

Ah.

[DOOR OPENS]

Oh, hiya Daisy!

DAISY

Come on.

BASIRA

Um, I'm kind of in the middle of something.

DAISY

Well, finish up. Sims is back. Wants to talk to everyone.

BASIRA

What? Since when?

DAISY

[Impatient] His flight got in a few hours ago.

BASIRA

And he called you?

DAISY

No. Elias sent me to pick him up. Didn't want him grabbed again.

BASIRA

Again?

DAISY

You coming?

BASIRA

Well, not yet. I've got to finish here first. You go on ahead.

…

Daisy?

DAISY

Fine.

[DOOR CLOSES]

BASIRA

Okay, where was I?

Right, okay, statement continues.

BASIRA (STATEMENT)

– we were just about to dive into the main discussion, when there was another knock at the door.

There was a quick look of confusion that passed between us all, and my heart sank, assuming one of my flatmates had returned earlier

than promised. I was dreading an awkward Lithuanian math student sitting in the corner with a glass of orange juice, staring at us as we self-consciously talked about… decomposition rates and timelines. But those worries vanished as soon as Jamie opened the door. The person who stood on the other side of it was definitely not one of my flatmates.

The first thing I noticed was the height. They were well over six foot, and the top of their head disappeared above the door. The second thing was the mask, pure white polystyrene, and cut into the rough shape of some kind of demon or wolf. The third thing I noticed was the knife.

Jamie noticed it too, and leapt backwards just as the figure lunged towards him. Suddenly everything was moving. Everyone was on their feet, shouting as the figure lumbered clumsily inside, swinging wildly at everyone who got near. I dashed to the small kitchen, and reached for a knife of my own, never taking my eyes off my target. It was a strange thing to watch. I would have expected everyone to be running; Evelyn and Debbie both had a clear path to the open door, but instead we were all just watching, keeping as much distance as possible, occasionally making a motion to disarm him, staying just out of the blade's path. As I reached for another knife, I found myself tapping my foot, as if to music.

Our attacker was starting to slow now, his movements becoming laboured, his lunges predictable and weak. When he swung at Andrew, his blade went too wide, and he overbalanced. Ananya didn't waste a second, dropping down and kicking him hard in the

back of the knee. He fell like… like an ancient tree, and his head slammed into the corner of the old wooden coffee table with a nasty thud. It tore through the thin grey string that held the mask in place. He lay there motionless.

The face underneath was nothing special. A bald man, maybe forty years old? None of us knew him. He wasn't an infamous murderer, or someone with a personal vendetta; he was just a man who came to my home to kill us. Everyone had gone very quiet, but it wasn't like a silence of shock or terror. It was more like a heavy silence of waiting for something to happen. Of expectation. Debbie finally spoke up, saying we should call the police, but she was lying and we all knew it. I looked down at my hands, and realised I'd picked up six knives from the kitchen drawer. Two were chef's knives, three were for vegetables and one was a battered old bread knife. All of them were sharp enough to do the job, even if I still hadn't quite figured out what the job was.

I walked slowly over to the unconscious figure on the floor. The others all leaned over him, inspecting their prize. I swear Ananya was licking her lips. When I reached them they all turned to stare at the blades in my hand, and one by one they took whichever knife spoke to them. I ended up with a vegetable knife, one of the smaller ones, but wickedly sharp. I can show it to you if you like.

We all stared at each other for a long few seconds, waiting, like there was going to be some invisible signal. And apparently there was, because all at once we descended, stabbing and slicing and carving and cutting, blood dripping and spraying up in tiny bursts

as our knives worked on him. I don't know exactly when he died. Maybe he was dead already when his head hit the table. It doesn't matter. It makes no difference to what happened.

And when it was over, we just stood there, satisfied, basking in what we'd done. Like the warm glow of an approving parent, tinged with a bloody sweetness. Or the feeling after a heavy but delicious meal, where you want nothing more than to sit and enjoy how full you feel. When Andrew suggested he get rid of the body, no-one thought to object. He and Jamie dragged it out, I assume to his car, and that was that. I guess they must have gotten rid of it. The police certainly haven't come round asking about a corpse. Not that I'd know if they had, I guess.

The others drifted out at their own pace. They didn't need to say goodbye. They… didn't need to say anything. We understood each other perfectly. I wandered dreamily into my bedroom, and fell onto my bed.

I was woken up by a pounding on my door. It was Matis, my flatmate, clearly angry and not a little alarmed at the mess in the living room. His face went pale when he saw I was streaked with gore, and he just kept asking, "Is it blood? Is it blood?" I didn't really know what to say to this, so… I just nodded, and he took a few steps backwards, then he turned and walked away unsteadily. I thought about following him, trying to explain what had happened at Murder Club, but there didn't seem much point. Poor Matis would never understand. At best he could only watch from the sidelines, getting a… a sad vicarious thrill from crimes he was too

cowardly to even consider. But I was better than that. I **am** better than that. I'm beyond.

I went back into my room to change into clean clothes. There was no need to announce my intentions to the world, and… the others would certainly be waiting. I took my small knife and tucked it away. I thought about testing it on Matis, but there was no way he would have been able to understand what was happening.

I first paid a visit to Andrew's house up near Hampstead, where I was told by his upset mother that he wasn't home. She said he had left abruptly, and had shoved her aside when she asked where he was going. As she said this I spun around, suddenly afraid I had left myself open, but the street was empty. I didn't even notice Andrew's mother slamming the door. I retreated to the shade of a tree to think about my next move. For some reason, the memory of the whiskey shop that Andrew had talked about the day before pushed into my head, so I smiled, and took off at a sprint. I'm sure it would have been quicker to take the Underground or a bus, but I craved that run through the cold November air, my blood pumping and my teeth sharp.

I arrived at the small Camden whiskey shop too late. Andrew wasn't there, but apparently Debbie and Jamie had had the same idea as me, and they'd met outside the shop. If I were a betting woman I'd have put money on Debbie, and I'd have been right. She was the sort of big with real strength behind it, and she had used it to put her bread knife all the way through Jamie's throat. She looked up from the body and saw me. And as soon as our eyes met, I knew the

chase was on, and this time *I* was the prey.

I fled, ducking through alleyways and market stalls as she ran after me. She had the edge in strength, but I was quick, and found it easier to slip through the morning crowds. I had a close call near Camden Lock, but I managed to lose her, disappearing up towards Holloway.

And the last five days have been more of that. I caught Evelyn alone two days ago on a bridge near Leytonstone. She almost threw me into the traffic below, but… instead I stabbed her four times in the chest, and my little vegetable blade found her heart. Andrew managed to lure Debbie into an ambush just outside my flat, of all places, even though I haven't been back since the last Murder Club. Which, I rather think will have been the *last* Murder Club.

And I was thinking, yesterday, how strange all this was. And it occurred to me that, while it might seem ridiculous, maybe there was something supernatural about all this. Maybe the chase isn't as normal as it feels. Before we killed that man, I don't think any of this would have felt right. So I thought I'd come and talk to you, before it all comes to an end. So, sorry if Andrew or Ananya attack anyone here because they saw me come in. I don't think they will, they're usually pretty careful, but still. I think that's all of it, really. I'm probably going to leave now, try to hunt down my friends. It's weird, you know? I don't remember feeling this way when we first set up Murder Club. But… I suppose at least we don't have to change the name.

BASIRA

Statement ends.

Damn. I remember this case. It was a bit before my time, but yeah. Six, um, 'friends', they basically spent about two weeks murdering each other before the last survivor was finally caught. Ananya Kaleka was apprehended just after she cut Lisa Carmel's throat in an alleyway near East Croydon station. The way the other officers told it, she never said a word except to plead guilty, and died in her cell a few months later. Apparently she just… stopped.

I don't know anything about any assailant in a mask, though. That's not a part of the story I've ever heard before. You don't get a great description in this statement, but it might be worth checking missing persons for that period, checking any violent offenders that might have disappear –

[KNOCKING AT THE DOOR]

[Sighs] Come in, Daisy.

[DOOR OPENS]

DAISY

You done?

BASIRA

Yeah, let's go.

DAISY

No need.

BASIRA

Um…?

DAISY

He's gone. Heading over to some storage unit. Says it's important.

BASIRA

Oh, so are we going to meet him there, or…?

DAISY

He asked for someone to stay back, distract Elias a bit. I said we'd do it.

BASIRA

Both of us?

DAISY

Yeah. Couldn't find Tim, but he's gone with Martin and… the other one.

BASIRA

Melanie.

DAISY

Sure.

BASIRA

I mean, it might be dangerous.

DAISY

They'll be fine.

BASIRA

Is… Is there something wrong, Daisy?

DAISY

[Quickly] No. So… how's your new job? Working a lot of overtime?

BASIRA

It's, uh… alright, I guess. Once you get used to constantly feeling like you're being watched. Just a bit of low-level dread. Kinda peaceful. Been reading a lot.

DAISY

Mmm.

BASIRA

How about you?

DAISY

Elias is keeping me busy. Hunting. Takes a while. *[Falters]* I'm used to working with a partner.

It's fine.

BASIRA

Daisy…

DAISY

It's *fine.*

BASIRA

Right. But it's not, though, is it?

DAISY

You're getting comfortable with all those books. Don't forget why you're here.

BASIRA

I know where I am, Daisy, and I know that I'm a prisoner.

DAISY

And you want to escape.

BASIRA

Yeah. But not on my own. We're working on something. I'll ask Melanie to fill you in.

DAISY

Fine.

…

Maybe you could ask Elias if you can join me on a case?

…

BASIRA

How does it feel?

DAISY

What?

BASIRA

How does it feel when you make a kill?

DAISY

[Wary] I don't know. Good. Why?

BASIRA

I don't know, it doesn't feel like… "the warm glow of an approving

parent, tinged with a bloody sweetness”?

DAISY

Don’t.

BASIRA

What?

DAISY

I’m not one of your bloody puzzles.

BASIRA

I’m sorry. I just… I worry.

DAISY

Worry about yourself. I’m fine.

BASIRA

Are you sure? ‘Cause you look…

Are you sleeping?

DAISY

Yeah.

…

Do you still have the dreams?

BASIRA

Um, no, not really. Not since we joined up here, I don't think. You?

DAISY

Yeah.

BASIRA

They're getting worse?

DAISY

No, not, it's just – Doesn't matter. We need to decide what to do with Elias before the others get to Hainault.

BASIRA

Daisy.

DAISY

I'm thinking a fire.

BASIRA

Maybe something a bit subtler? A problem in the break room?

DAISY

I could beat someone up?

BASIRA

Maybe. Anyway, do you want to, um… I could do with some air.

[CLICK]

MAG113 – Breathing Room

Statement #571–U

[CLICK]

[ALL AUDIO IS SOMEWHAT MUFFLED, AS IF THE TAPEDECK IS IN A BAG OR BOX]

[RATTLE OF A ROLL-UP SHUTTER OPENING]

ARCHIVIST

There.

MARTIN

Huh.

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

I just… I thought it would be less… I don't know, crowded.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, you know Gertrude. If something's worth doing, it's worth…

looking through two dozen unmarked cardboard boxes for.

MELANIE

So, what **are** we looking for?

ARCHIVIST

I'm… still not exactly sure. I-It might be an old, taxidermied gorilla skin. Or… not. Apparently it should be obvious.

MELANIE

Right. Then let's get on with it.

[NOISES OF MOVEMENT & SEARCHING]

MARTIN

So, you actually met vampire Trevor then?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, I, I met… quite a few people from the statements. You remember, er, Dr. Elliott's statement? The anatomy students trying to pose as people, who definitely weren't people?

MARTIN

Oh… y-yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Well, turns out one of them became a police officer. Or, pretended to.

MARTIN

Ugh, ooh… Is that the one Trevor…?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

And he… killed it?

ARCHIVIST

Umm… That's – I mean, it's not as simple as… Found anything yet?

MARTIN

Er… er… Bunch of… eyeless paintings.

MELANIE

[Jovially] Snap! Eyeless dolls. Oh, and just a lot of shredded newspapers.

ARCHIVIST

Same.

MARTIN

Mmm.

Ooh! Ooh! There's a book in this one.

ARCHIVIST

[Hastily] Don't… touch it!

MARTIN

Ooh… OH! Right, yes.

ARCHIVIST

Let's… not touch any books we don't know.

MARTIN

Right.

ARCHIVIST

Step back.

[PAUSE, THEN CAUTIOUS PAGE TURNING]

ARCHIVIST

[Exhales] It's just a notebook. I think… um…

[MARTIN SIGHS IN RELIEF]

MARTIN

What's in it?

ARCHIVIST

Not sure, er… Names, locations, dates. I'll, I'll check properly later. Doesn't look like it's to do with the Unknowing, I don't think.

Right.

[SEARCHING RESUMES]

MARTIN

So… how was it?

ARCHIVIST

Ah?

MARTIN

America? And China? I've never really actually done any, you know, travelling.

MELANIE

It's not all that. Sometimes you get shot by a ghost.

ARCHIVIST

And refuse to give a statement about it.

MELANIE

Yup!

ARCHIVIST

It was nice, Martin.

[Reconsiders] It was… weird. Paranoia is an odd combination with culture shock. Really rather disorientating.

MARTIN

I mean… it wasn't actually paranoia, though, was it? Because, they were out to get you.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose that they were.

MELANIE

Wasn't a great time back here, either.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, god, Melanie, of course. I'm… I'm sorry. If I'd known that Ivy Meadows was –

MELANIE

What?! You'd have told me? Let me learn from one of your statements instead of from Elias? I don't see that changing anything.

ARCHIVIST

Even so, I… am… I'm sorry.

MELANIE

I don't need your apology. Or your pity.

ARCHIVIST

Of course. *[Then much quieter]* Of course.

Martin's plan is solid. I think.

MARTIN

I mean, they might just kill him.

MELANIE

Good.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, maybe. But… I think they're still our best chance. Even if we did manage to blindside him, I-I don't know how long we could… hold him.

MARTIN

And, in fairness, he's happy enough to use the police against **us**.

ARCHIVIST

Quite. And I'd rather not be staring down a kidnapping charge on top of everything –

MELANIE

[Urgently] Uh, John?

ARCHIVIST

Yes?

MELANIE

I… I think I found that gorilla skin you were talking about….

ARCHIVIST

Perfect! Er, now if we could just –

MELANIE

Or, I'm afraid… uh, what's, what's left of it.

ARCHIVIST

Oh.

MELANIE

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

So… she did destroy it.

MELANIE

Apparently.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[SOUNDS OF BOX LATCHES BEING UNDONE AS THE ARCHIVIST SPEAKS]

So if that's… **not** what we're looking for…

MARTIN

J-J-John, John!

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

I think I've found it!

ARCHIVIST

W-Wh-What is it?

[MELANIE CACKLES]

MELANIE

I think you're gonna want to see this!

ARCHIVIST

Good lord! Is… Is that…?

MELANIE

Looks like it.

ARCHIVIST

Where the hell did she get this? I –

Martin, don't **touch** it!

MARTIN

Sorry!

ARCHIVIST

Is it… stable?

MELANIE

How should I know? I don't even know what kind it is!

ARCHIVIST

I mean, it looks like… C4?

MELANIE

Are you just saying that because it's the only plastic explosive you've ever heard of?

ARCHIVIST

Well, I mean, that is to say…

MARTIN

– so many others –

ARCHIVIST

M-Martin! Stop trying to *touch* the plastic explosive!

MARTIN

Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

MELANIE

Guys…

ARCHIVIST

Just put your hands in your pockets, or… something…

MARTIN

Look, I said, I said I'm sorry…

MELANIE

Guys!

ARCHIVIST & MARTIN

What?

MELANIE

Do you hear that?

MARTIN

Hear what?

ARCHIVIST

Oh…

MELANIE

It's like…

ARCHIVIST

Oh goddammit…

Oookay.

MELANIE

Is, is that…?

[UNZIPPING OF A BAG]

MARTIN

[Explodes] What were you **thinking** bringing that along?!

ARCHIVIST

I just – I mean – I forgot!

MELANIE

[Indignant & furious] You **forgot**?!

MARTIN

[Screeching] Turn it off!

ARCHIVIST

I am! Just give me a second –

MELANIE

[Clenched teeth] Turn it off!

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

[Deep sigh] Statement of Adelard Dekker, regarding the near death and subsequent activities of Justin Gough. Statement undated, likely circa 2012. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Gertrude,

It should all be here, though god knows I was tempted to take a block for myself just in case. I won't even press you for where you got it, though if some of these leads pan out I might need to ask you to track down some more. I assume whatever surveillance meant you needed me to move it, is only keeping track of *you,* but let me know if there's anything I need to be on the lookout for. Anyway, you owe me a favour. And… maybe another one once you read this. It might come to nothing, but it's something you should probably be aware of. I'll even make it a statement. Give your patron something to keep it satisfied. It's not like I sleep enough to worry about dreams.

I was pursuing my researches into the new emergence I mentioned earlier. I know you are dismissive of the possibility, but if I'm right, the sudden urgency of these "immediate dangers" you are so focused on could very well be a direct result. But that's for another day, as this particular instance turned out to be unconnected. The point is, I was alerted to a series of deaths by a coroner friend of mine.

Although all signs pointed to carbon monoxide poisoning, the bodies showed signs of acute distress. The sort you don't normally get when you die in your sleep. There was blood pooled in the back of the throat, and the vocal cords were shredded, although no neighbours reported hearing a sound. And most importantly, at all three scenes there was evidence of a second person who had apparently left without suffering any ill effects. The deaths were

about a fortnight apart, and when the third came in with the same symptoms, Bianca, the coroner, called me in. For the last few years we've had an… arrangement. I slip her a bit of cash to feed a nasty habit she has, and if she's called to any inquest which looks strange, I'm the first to know.

Despite her weakness, Bianca is still a damn good coroner, and filled me in on the details quickly. The deaths had been carbon monoxide, she said, and by way of example showed me a plastic cup full of blood. It was bright red. "Cherry red", Bianca told me, a good sign of CO poisoning. But apparently they hadn't found any trace of the gas in the homes of the deceased. Current theory was that someone was deliberately gassing people while they slept, but Bianca was adamant that, as far as she could tell, it seemed to have bypassed the lungs completely, appearing right into their blood as carbohaemoglobin or whatever. From the look on their faces I could tell two things. It had hurt. And they had never woken up.

You see why I thought this might be related? Well, hoped more than thought, maybe. The man-made nature of it seemed like a potential link, but it had few of the other hallmarks. Still, I thought it was worth following up on. Finding who was… killing these people in their sleep.

It's odd, isn't it? Sleep. That you can never remember or fully pin down the exact moment you lose consciousness. Just lying there, waiting to find yourself in a dream without the first clue or interest in how or when you got there. Or to find your eyes closed and force them open to sunlight and morning, only realising that sleep has

happened in retrospect. I wonder if… death is the same way? No clear dividing line, just… gone, only to realise after it's happened, except for the fact that there isn't an after. Is that a comforting thought or a terrifying one? Depends on who you are, I suppose. It bothered me when I was young. If I thought too hard about the concept of sleep, of exactly what it was, I would worry myself, and end up having to turn the light on, and read for an hour or two. Everyone always talks about how they want to die in their sleep, but honestly, I think that's the death that scares me the most.

But that's a meditation for another day. As far as these deaths were concerned, I was confident there was *something* turning up in people's houses and doing this to them. My first thought was a direct manifestation, but the more I looked into it, the more I suspected maybe it was some poor soul who got in too deep. I don't know if my little 'theoretical' is strong enough yet to start taking avatars, but this one, as you've no doubt guessed, turned out to be Terminus.

Justin Gough, his name was. He was admitted to Accident and Emergency at Whipps Cross Hospital about two months ago, suffering from – I'm sure it will come as no surprise – acute carbon monoxide poisoning. He had been camping, and taken a small barbeque into his tent to keep warm. And it… warmed his lungs all the way to the hospital. He was terrified and unintelligible, and then he died. For fifty-two seconds. According to the duty nurse, that is how long Justin Gough was clinically dead, before they managed to restart his heart and get him on a breather machine.

It's hard to scream with a breathing tube in you, but apparently he gave it a noble attempt when he woke up. The nurse I talked to hadn't been there, but he had apparently had some sort of near-death experience, and had been describing awful visions to those attending him, muttering obliquely about "terrible things" he'd had to do to return, and prices that would need to be paid. None of the staff who were present would willingly say much more about it, but it had clearly shaken them.

Justin Gough was discharged shortly after, and in rapid succession quit his job, disappeared from social media, and cut off effectively *all* human contact. He became, to all intents and purposes, a recluse who hasn't left the house since. Or so the neighbours would say. I had a suspicion that he was leaving, but by night, and for a single, very specific purpose. To pay a debt. While many fall to the Powers through love or terror, sometimes it can be as simple as what you owe. After all, most debts are paid out of fear.

The hospital refused to give me his address, but I managed to acquire it anyway. His building was a squalid little apartment block, in such a state I found it hard to believe that he'd had to go camping in order to get poisoned. The windows were well-barred against intruders, and I didn't think this was a situation where I could simply knock on the door. So I waited. For two days I sat there, watching the damp eat away at the bricks of that half-rotten building. I was all but ready to write it off, and look for another option, when at last the front door opened and out stepped Justin Gough.

Now, I didn't have a picture of the man, and had been intending to go on the description given by the hospital workers, but in the end I recognised him simply by the thin trickle of cherry red blood that rolled slowly down his chin, and the fact that, as I watched him descend the steps of his building and walk out onto the pavement, I am quite sure that I did not see him breathe.

He was not a tall man, but his frame was rail-thin, and what face I was able to make out was gaunt and hollow. We've both seen our share of bodies, Gertrude, so you will understand what I mean when I tell you he had the 'eyes of the dead'. They moved and they focused, but that subtle glimmer that shows life was wholly absent. All that was left was a skittish sort of terror, as he glanced over his shoulder, desperate to see if he was being followed, and of course overlooking me completely.

This worried me. As you know, I am not by any means a Hunter, and if Justin Gough **was** as far gone as he appeared, it was likely he was no longer human enough for me to remove him without the aid of one. And while I do know one or two I believe are touched by the scent of blood, they are… unpredictable, and I was reluctant to call on them in any but the most dire circumstances, which I did not believe this to be. So I simply followed him, hoping to get slightly more of an idea of exactly what he was doing.

His walk had a *certainty* to it. I never once saw him consult a map, or pause to consider his destination. He knew exactly where he was going, and his steps were slow and implacable. There was… an inevitability to his movements, and I think that is when I realised

he was simply serving The End, which I won't pretend wasn't a disappointment. But still, I thought if I could deal with him and save a few lives, I might as well.

He walked for some hours, until finally coming upon a small house down a cul-de-sac near Hackney Wick. It seemed… unremarkable, and had nothing to distinguish it from those that surrounded it. He walked up to the door and pushed it gently. It opened silently, and he walked inside. So I waited a minute or two, watching for any movement within, listening for any sound that might break the still, humid air. But there was nothing, and I followed him inside.

Justin Gough was sat in the main bedroom. His back pressed against the wall opposite a bed, where a middle-aged man lay sleeping. The room was quiet, and at first I thought there was no movement at all, but as I watched, I saw the face of the man in the bed contort and spasm, as though racked with awful nightmares, his chest heaving and convulsing as he struggled to breathe. I looked to the man I assumed to be his assailant, but to all appearances, it seemed like Justin Gough was also asleep, sat in the corner of that nondescript suburban bedroom. But then I saw his eyelids flicker, and I realised what was going on.

What **is** the line between a near-death experience and a dream? Perhaps you do leave yourself, brush against the afterlife and return, but… I don't believe it. I believe they are both simply the firings of a brain we no longer have control over, and perhaps if you make contact with something terrible in one, it continues to live with you in the other. And perhaps it demands you infect

others with your fate.

I was not quick enough to save the man who lived in that house. Truth be told, I didn't especially try. I didn't think I would be able to move quick enough to do so, and was more concerned with being quiet and thorough. The cutlery drawer was largely empty, but after a minute's searching I did find what I was after: a long, metal skewer.

Did you know there are certain forms of brain injury that cut you off from your ability to dream? Ironically enough, it's sometimes caused by carbon monoxide poisoning, but there is still no definitive answer about which part of the brain needs to be injured for it to happen. So I made the decision it was better to be on the safe side, as I pushed the point up past his eye, sliding it into that little gap between eyeball and tear duct, and up into his brain.

I knew it wouldn't kill him, he's too far from human for me to do so, but I thought that scrambling his brain a bit was probably my best bet. And I was right, as far as it goes. He survived what I did to him, and when the police picked him up after an 'anonymous tip' about a break-in, he was barely able to speak, and I very much hope I managed to sever his dreams.

I have no interest in pursuing this further, but given the mind's remarkable aptitude for healing, not to mention the resilience of creatures like him, I cannot make any guarantees Justin Gough will remain in the state I left him. And it seems that, as he deals in dreams, it may be worth your while to keep an eye on the

statements you take, in case he finds his way here. I'm sure you can take care of yourself, of course, but I thought it would be worth letting you know. Good luck, Gertrude. And enjoy the fireworks.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

This was found tucked into a hard case containing… many blocks of plastic explosive, kept by Gertrude Robinson in a storage unit that I can only assume has… extremely lax oversight. It is *unclear* if she ever read it.

You know, after my conversation with Gerard, I, I actually thought I was starting to get a handle on everything, how it works, the connections between it all. It is… strangely reassuring to have a statement where, once again, I find myself having… remarkably little idea what it's talking about. Justin Gough was clearly an avatar of The End, but… I have no idea what else Dekker was alluding to.

So Gertrude knew Adelard Dekker as well? I wonder, is there anyone connected to the supernatural that she was not on first-name terms with? I suppose if you spend fifty years as the focal point of horrors, eventually everyone ends up knowing you. Or dead. Or… both.

I know there are more important things to be doing, but I did ask Basira to have a quick search for Justin Gough, see what might have happened to him. There are records of his residence in an East

London care facility until 2015, when he disappears from their records. Several deaths among the staff apparently occurred at roughly the same time. And it will come as no surprise that the inquest returned a verdict of carbon monoxide poisoning in each case.

I'm not too concerned, to be honest, my dreams are, uh… well, let's just say I don't think they're going to be letting anyone else in any time soon.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG114 – Cracked Foundation

Statement #0092204

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Anya Villette, regarding a cleaning job on Hill Top Road. Original statement given April 22nd, 2009. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I don't know this place. They said I should come and talk to you. A few people did. People I thought I knew, but they were different. I should know this place, I think. I used to go to the Tate a lot when I lived in London, and I, I passed the building, but… I don't know you people. Nothing makes sense anymore.

It was meant to be just a quick job. Since the divorce I've been back working as a cleaner, and for the last month or so John Hector Lettings in Oxford have been bringing me in to get student houses ready for next year's occupants. It's not always pleasant work. After all, students are not exactly careful tenants; I've had to spend more

than one afternoon scraping and repainting bedroom walls for some soon-to-be-dropout that turned the room into a hotbox. But it pays the bills. Barely.

I guess this is why I was so keen when I got the call about Hill Top Road. A nice, simple job. No pulling out instant noodles from behind the oven. No post-grad party gunk to find behind the sofa. Just a newly built house that needed a good clean once the builders were finished. Hoover up some plaster dust, wipe down the counters, a bit of polish on the metal fittings… easy. If there were already beds in there, maybe I'd grab a quick nap, make up for all the unpaid overtime I'd had to put in steam cleaning the last house where some of them had made *active* use of the bedroom. All told I thought it was the break I'd earned, and not a moment too soon.

It was raining when I pulled into the house. Not heavy, but the sky was that soggy grey that lets you know the weather isn't changing anytime soon. As a rule I don't mind the rain too much, but there was nothing relaxing about this weather. No regular thump of droplets tapping on bin lids or windscreens; you just ended up damp and grumpy. I've been thinking back, trying to remember if I got any kind of… *sense* about that house. Whether the windows were darker than they should have been, or if the frame of the place was… *heavier*. I don't know. Hard to tell, I was too busy trying to manoeuvre the keys without having to put my bag down on the waterlogged path. It wasn't until I actually got through the door that anything seemed to be at all wrong.

Even then it was only small things. Easy to ignore. I'm not

superstitious, never used to be at least, so how dim the lights were made me think the owners were cheap; maybe they'd decided to go all-in on those weak energy-saving bulbs. The cold? I just thought it was an empty house that hadn't turned the heating on yet. The small movements of the dust covers… that was the first thing that actually caught my attention.

The owners of the house had already filled it with furniture. Not *good* furniture, of course: just the cheapest IKEA had that wouldn't collapse under the weight of a textbook. It was all assembled, though, and… covered with thick sheets of white plastic, to try and keep the dust off. Not a strange sight in my line of work, so I just ignored it, and headed down to the kitchen to start wiping down the surfaces.

I don't know why I always like to start in the kitchen; it sort of feels like the heart of a home, at least to me, and I like to begin there and work outwards. Or maybe I just like food, and by the time I start on a job, I'm usually already hungry for lunch. That said, the sort of houses I usually clean, I'm more likely to lose that appetite when I stumble on something in the kitchen. This one was already almost pristine, though. A bit of dust on the surfaces, some careless flecks of paint was the worst I had to contend with. Even the oven was spotless and new.

But as I was wiping down the sink, I sort of zoned out. The window in the kitchen looked out over the garden, and… I froze as I noticed that in the centre, there was a tree. It was still bare from the winter, and from the top of it, there were these eight thick branches, just

stretching out at all angles, some… reaching up to the sky, and some… it felt like they were reaching towards me. It was almost black against the dark grey sky, and the rain made it *shine.* My mouth was dry, and I suddenly had this… *vision* in my head, of walking out the back door, and standing at the base of that tree, as those branches bent, and snapped, and came down to grab me. But I was in the kitchen, and I was still dry. I finished up quickly, and headed off to do the rest of the house.

I tried to ignore it, just told myself I was having a weird bit of paranoia. Getting myself worked up over nothing. I don't believe in ghosts, you know, and even if I *did,* it was a new house. It's not like anyone's building over ancient burial grounds in East Oxford. But even then I was finding it hard to ignore the movements. Slight rustles in the dust sheets that covered the furniture. Shadows they made that didn't… quite *work* with the shape they should be. Or this lump or angle, sometimes, so I'd wonder if they were just covering chairs. Whenever I turned around I swear I heard them shift, and when I looked back, I can't be sure, but I think they would be different, covering something different. I never got the nerve up to take any of them off, though. I just pressed on, tried to get the place clean and finished as quick as I could. Living room, bathroom, upstairs bedrooms… it was almost getting dark by the time I was finished.

It was such a relief as I started to pack up my bag, and I was just about to zip it closed when I remembered the cupboard under the stairs. It hadn't been included in the job list, but in most houses I

cleaned I liked to give the storage spaces a bit of a tidy and a vacuum as well. It was always brought up by my employers as 'evidence of my thoroughness', and I took a lot of pride in it. But in my hurry to be finished and out of Hill Top Road, I hadn't even checked it. I looked at the small door, then back to my half-zipped bag, and… I decided to just take a quick look. Just a quick look. It was a new house. How dirty could it be?

Obviously it was my decision. I remember the little handle was *warm.* I don't know if that's just my memory playing tricks on me, but I do remember that. It opened to reveal stairs going down into a basement. Nobody had mentioned a basement. Not when they gave me the job, not on the floor plan they'd given me; I'd had absolutely no idea it was there. I found my legs were shaking as my brain pushed forward one question over and over: do they expect me to clean down there?

I decided, again, just to have a look. Just a quick look. See if there was anything down there that did need my attention. Maybe it was already spotless, or maybe it hadn't been tanked, and was still just bare brick and stone, too raw for me to do anything with anyway. I just had to check.

It was warmer down there, warmer every step, and I found myself brushing cobwebs from my face as I got further down, until at last there I was – stood in the cellar of Hill Top Road. There was just a very quick second of relief, of letting my breath out. I saw how damp it was, full of unfinished brickwork, definitely not something any estate agent would expect me to clean. And then I noticed the

crack.

It seemed to split the floor right down the middle; it was jagged, vicious, like something had torn out the ground with a hook. It was maybe a foot across at its widest, and so dark inside it made my teeth ache. I'm not sure how I saw it. Thinking now I know that there wasn't any light down there, but… that horrid gap was clear as day, darker than just the simple lack of light that surrounded it. And then I was at the edge looking down, and those eight spindly arms reaching up to pull me in. I couldn't have screamed even if I wanted to.

I woke up in one of the chairs, the dust cover clinging to me like a cocoon. I threw it off, and ran out of that house, and I haven't been back. But now… everything's wrong. I went to clean that house on April the 23rd, 2009 which, according to all of you, is tomorrow. But it **can't** be. That was two weeks ago. I've tried to talk to my friends about it. Those of my friends I can find, but they seem distant, like they don't really know me. Everything is just… *wrong.* I can't find my favourite coffee shop. And I don't know who you people are.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Interesting. I'm not really sure what to do with this one. Martin brought it up, said he'd found one that related back to Hill Top Road, a thread that's been nagging at me for a while, but… I mean,

it seems straightforward enough, except… that it never happened. As far as I can tell, Anya Villette doesn't exist. John Hector Lettings *does* seem to be a real estate agent's in Oxford, but according to our enquiries they've never employed anyone by that name to work as a cleaner, nor are they currently responsible for the infamous house.

Basira found a couple of possibilities online that might have been her, but the two that almost matched, both professed complete ignorance to any of this. As far as we can tell, the house has no estate agent looking after it, and no current owner. Certainly no plans to lease it to students. I've half a mind to just go down and have a look at it myself, but… I don't know. Ever since it first came up I've felt like it would be… just a very *bad* idea.

We've been trying to get a closer look at the documents, figure out who technically owns the place, but… it's been over a year, and we're still waiting. Haven't really had the time to foll–

[FAINT METALLIC NOISES]

Ah…

[THE ARCHIVIST TAKES A DEEP BREATH]

[SOUND OF WOODEN BOARD BEING MOVED ASIDE]

ARCHIVIST

Hello, Tim.

TIM

Oh god…

ARCHIVIST

Come in, please.

TIM

[Sigh, then faux-polite] Good to see you, Boss.

How've you been?

ARCHIVIST

I'm not going to lie to you, Tim. It's been a difficult few months.

TIM

[Deadpan] Good.

ARCHIVIST

And h– I would like to hear how *you've* been doing.

TIM

Me? Oh, I've been just **fine**. I'll see you later.

ARCHIVIST

You're sure? You've not – There is nothing you want to say to me.

TIM

Nothing with that **thing** here, no.

ARCHIVIST

[Softly] Interesting.

What do you think is listening?

TIM

What?

ARCHIVIST

[Strongly] What do you think is listening to the tapes?

TIM

Don't do that.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry.

TIM

Don't!

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, I didn't –

TIM

And you **know** what I think. It's that… the thing that runs the

Institute. “The Watcher” or “The Eye” or whatever.

ARCHIVIST

I dis… I disagree. This whole place is a temple to The Eye, Tim. I don’t think the tape recorders make any difference.

TIM

[Viciously] Elias, then.

ARCHIVIST

In that case we’ll stick to talking about things he already knows.

TIM

Why are you **so** set on having it running?

ARCHIVIST

I…

Look, if you want my honest opinion –

TIM

I don’t.

ARCHIVIST

Whatever is on the other side of those tapes is just as invested in stopping the Circus as **you** are in avenging your brother.

TIM

…

You listened to it, then? My statement.

ARCHIVIST

I listened to all the tapes. I, I had no idea how much of a… a mess I left this place in, I-I-I'm sorry.

TIM

Bit of an invasion of privacy.

ARCHIVIST

I assume that's a joke?

TIM

[Bitter laugh] Isn't it just?

…

How did you know I was going to be here?

ARCHIVIST

Th-The others haven't seen you in weeks, and you've still been using the computers here, accessing files and books… I know there are some exits to the tunnels outside the Institute, so I guessed you were using them to get in and out, avoiding any… tape recorders.

TIM

Okay, whatever. But how did you know I was going to be **here**, now?

ARCHIVIST

…

I just… did.

TIM

“You just did”? Great. Buy one spooky telepath manager, get one free, is it? Fan-tastic.

ARCHIVIST

That’s not what this is.

TIM

[Angry] Oh, and how about you read my mind *now?*

ARCHIVIST

Tim, that isn’t… I can’t.

TIM

‘Cause I can give you a clue. It ends in “off”.

ARCHIVIST

I… I assume you've been doing your own research into the Circus and the Unknowing. I would **like** to pool our knowledge.

TIM

So why don't you 'Archivist' me, then? Just pull it straight out.

ARCHIVIST

Because I don't want to. I am **not** your enemy, Tim.

TIM

[Dismissively] Like that matters. These things **aren't human**. It's… *instinct.* You can't *not.*

ARCHIVIST

[Softly] I'm still me, Tim.

[TIM HUFFS]

I'm still me.

[TIM EXHALES DEEPLY]

TIM

…

You know what? You're actually right.

ARCHIVIST

What?

TIM

You're the only one.

ARCHIVIST

I – S-Sorry, I do-don't follow.

…

Tim?

TIM

Do you know why I avoid the others?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, y-you said, the tapes…

TIM

No. How can I be *sure* who they are?

ARCHIVIST (BACKGROUND)

Oh…

TIM

You know how long that *thing* pretended to be Sasha?

ARCHIVIST (BACKGROUND)

Oh god.

TIM

And I had **no** idea? I knew Sasha for years, we…

I don't know Martin as well as I knew her. I barely know what Melanie and Basira *look* like. Or that weird murder-cop. How the hell am I supposed to be sure of any of them?

ARCHIVIST

[Softly] Tim, I… I didn't realise. I-I didn't think.

I'm sorry.

TIM

I mean, there's worms and hallways and clowns, and… In some ways it doesn't even register. Like, just another spook. But I can't *trust* them. I'm going to destroy the Circus that took my brother, and I can't trust them to help.

ARCHIVIST

And me?

TIM

[Snorts] Well, if you're trying to spy on us, you're doing a pretty shitty job. You haven't been here for months.

ARCHIVIST

That's not fair! Sometimes I was kidnapped.

TIM

Which is not a good look for a spy, is it?

ARCHIVIST

Fine.

TIM

Anyway, you're a spook too now, aren't you? This place loves you too much to let *you* get swapped.

ARCHIVIST

What about Elias? Surely he's the same?

TIM

Oh, yeah. Great idea. *[Sarcastically]* Let's just all trust Elias.

ARCHIVIST

Point taken.

TIM

[Sigh] Screw it.

…

I know where they're doing it. Th-The ritual. And I think they're almost ready.

ARCHIVIST

R-right. Where?

TIM

In the House of Wax, in Great Yarmouth.

ARCHIVIST

Ohhh… I thought it might be there, but th-the others, we, we couldn't find any evidence of, of movement or, well, life.

TIM

I had to wait almost two weeks. But it's there.

ARCHIVIST

Why do you think they're doing it so soon?

TIM

Skin. That's what they need right? They tried to take yours.

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

TIM

Well, last week they went on a couple of field trips to a pair of cemeteries.

ARCHIVIST

Who did they take?

TIM

New graves. No flowers. The first had a name on, no dates, no inscription. “George Icarus”.

ARCHIVIST

I, I don’t know the name. Who was the other?

…

Tim?

TIM

Gertrude.

ARCHIVIST

[Softly] What?

TIM

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

I-I-I… I thought she was cremated?!

TIM

I guess not.

[THE ARCHIVIST EXHALES DEEPLY]

ARCHIVIST

So they did get an Archivist's skin after all.

TIM

[Snidely] So, what's the plan, Boss?

ARCHIVIST

Heh. I, er… I think you're going to like it, actually.

TIM

[Unconvinced] Oh yeah?

ARCHIVIST

Should be quite… *cathartic.* I just need to… confirm a few details.

TIM

Fine. But you **don't** cut me out!

ARCHIVIST

I won't.

TIM

I –

ARCHIVIST

I promise!

Now, um, if you'll excuse me.

TIM

Oh, er… er, right.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, well, you're not the only one that knows his way around the tunnels, so…

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[DOWN IN THE TUNNELS]

ARCHIVIST

[Sotto voce] Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. Sixteen.

[WHISTLES]

[FOOTSTEPS]

BASIRA

All clear?

ARCHIVIST

[Surprised] Uh, yes. Yes! Uh, all clear.

[MORE FOOTSTEPS]

BASIRA

Sorry, got a bit lost. Don’t know how you find your way around down here.

ARCHIVIST

Practice.

You alright, Daisy?

DAISY

[NONCOMMITAL SOUNDS]

BASIRA

Don’t think either of us like it down here.

ARCHIVIST

Uh, well, no, me neither. Feels…

DAISY

Empty.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

BASIRA

That it?

ARCHIVIST

[Smilingly] Yes!

DAISY

How long have you had that shirt?

BASIRA

Um…

ARCHIVIST

What?

DAISY

That shirt. You get it in China?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, A-America. I had to borrow it, there was… there was blood.

DAISY

Sure.

BASIRA

Why?

DAISY

Hmm.

[CONFUSED SOUNDS FROM THE ARCHIVIST]

BASIRA

Shall I…

I'll leave you two alone. I… need to… have that chat with Elias.

[DEPARTING FOOTSTEPS]

ARCHIVIST

Right. Right.

Yes.

…

So… how’ve you been?

DAISY

[Emotionless] Fine. Killing mannequins for Elias. And a clown. It’s been alright.

ARCHIVIST

Has he… said anything about the plan?

DAISY

No. Is there one?

ARCHIVIST

Umm… Sort of.

[SOUND OF CASE BEING UNLOCKED]

DAISY

[Incredulous] Ohhh. That real?

ARCHIVIST

You tell me.

DAISY

[Excitedly] Where'd you get this?

ARCHIVIST

G-Gertrude left it. Er, apparently for, er, this exact situation.

DAISY

Where did she get it?

ARCHIVIST

I-I find myself asking that question a lot.

DAISY

So… this ritual, you're just going to blow it up?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, as long as you know how to… I mean, you can use this stuff?

DAISY

[Contentedly] Yeah. I reckon I can.

ARCHIVIST

Good.

DAISY

So, do you have a plan?

ARCHIVIST

Um… We're working on it.

…

You think she's found him by now?

DAISY

Maybe. Maybe he's not watching anyway.

ARCHIVIST

I-I just… I feel safer if I think he's distracted. Is the… the rest of it…?

DAISY

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

And Martin… he's okay with it?

DAISY

It was his idea.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. You think it'll work?

DAISY

No idea. If you can get me or Basira the – *[tails off frustratedly]*

ARCHIVIST

What?

DAISY

Tape!

ARCHIVIST

Oh, yeah.

[CLICK]

MAG115 – Taking Stock

Statement #0070401

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Mikaele Salesa, regarding an antique meat grinder in his possession during the autumn of 1999. Original statement given January 4th 2007. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

So it's another statement is it? Like I *owe* you something? Even though I warned you the handle might have splinters, that you should always be wearing gloves if you're going to try firing it. And you *knew* where it was from, the signs of rage and violence to be watching for. So far, I don't see how it's my fault, and I don't consider myself liable.

That said, I don't want you thinking I don't appreciate you keeping it quiet. You all have been one of my most stable customers, and I'd hate to sour the business. So I suppose if it's a statement you're wanting… it's no inconvenience to me. I don't sleep well anyway.

So what's it going to be? Could go over what got me started in the business; that's a story I haven't told you yet. Though there's less in the telling than you might expect. My first job was working with Jurgen Leitner, but I got out of that years before the man met his fate. Started looking for the exit about the time that I saw Warren get literally eaten by a book. And before you start cross-referencing, looking for some newly-birthed monster called Warren, I don't mean eaten like that. It left behind the leg. Don't know any transformations that leave behind your leg.

So I gave Leitner my walking papers, and struck out on my own. I had no intention of following in his footsteps with the books, and when I began it was just normal, high-end antiques I was moving. Leitner's client list, which I'd taken the *liberty* of copying, did me proud. The man had a knack for sniffing out moneyed fools with no sense of the value of things. Combine that with my own skill at evading a lot of the 'legal entanglements' the trade can get caught up in, and making money was not much of a challenge. Once or twice one of them would try to sell me a book, but when **I** learn a lesson, I learn it to my bones.

After a while, some of those familiar with Leitner and his library approached me with some of the more… unusual items they had locked away. The sort of thing they'd have sold to him if they'd been bound in paper, rather than ceramic or wood. I didn't want anything to do with them, not to begin with, but you've seen for yourself that the artefacts are not so volatile as the books, and they fetch a pretty penny, so eventually I started dealing in them as well.

So there's that. But I don't think that's the sort of statement you're after is it? No. You want something a little ghoulish. Something to stick your teeth into. Fine. I've got one. You see, in this game there are a few rules it's a good idea to keep to if you're looking to stay alive. One of mine, is that only **I** take stock of the merchandise. You want to know how I came by this rule? I know you do.

So there was a man worked on my ship. Let's call him 'Cook'. Not his real name of course, but real enough for this and, thinking about it, it's unlikely he signed up with his real name anyway. Now, Cook, his main job was what you'd expect: working in the galley to keep my small crew fed. But on a ship like that, all of you pitch in all of the time, even me, and cooking a few meals a day doesn't stop you having other duties. And one of those duties was checking on the cargo, making sure none of the breakables had managed to, wel , break. Any other crew I'd have been worried about theft, but I'd been with most of these for two or three years, so there was plenty of trust there.

This must have been some time in September, back in '99, and for most of the journey Cook had been checking on the merchandise with no problem at all. But on the last week or so of that voyage, he'd been taking longer and longer, and it was starting to affect meal times, and so on one of those occasions I made my way down to check on him. And, of course, I found him staring into one of the boxes.

The item in question that we were transporting for sale was an old antique meat grinder. The sort with a heavy vice you clamp on the

table, and a nice big crank for twisting the screw, push the meat from the funnel along and into the mincer. It was a rusty old thing, all heavy iron and brand names worn away to nothing. If it wasn't for the fact that it was near two hundred years old it would have been more valuable as scrap. Even with the age I wasn't confident we could shift it. Without looking at my records, I couldn't tell you where I picked it up, and I'm sure it wasn't pointed out to me as one of the *weirder* items. No warnings or nothing like that.

But Cook, he couldn't get enough of it. He was staring at the thing, a look of longing in his eyes. With another decade under my belt, I now know how stupid my next action was, but I used to consider myself someone who looks after my crew, and Cook seemed real taken with the thing. I honestly wasn't sure how well it was going to sell anyway, so I named a fair price and offered to take it out of his wages if he wanted to claim the grinder for his own. He said yes immediately, and was mighty thankful of my generosity. He grabbed the thing like it weighed nothing at all, which was the first clue I took proper notice of, and sprinted off to make lunch.

That night dinner was hamburgers. I made a joke to Cook about him getting good use out of the meat grinder already, and he laughed, told me it was from frozen, but looking back now I don't think he laughed as long or as hard as I might have liked. The meat was good, juicy, and honestly it didn't taste as if it had been frozen at all. The sausages the next night were the same.

Cook was different as well. Whenever I passed him I got a little bit of a smell. Like a raw steak just hitting the grill. Not an unpleasant

smell, not at all, but certainly one I'd never noticed on him before. Occasionally, if he was wearing white, I could see small spots or smears of blood just at the edges. It might have been his own, working on a ship you get your share of cuts, but after a couple of days it became a little bit on the… *unnerving* side. He smiled more as well, and I'm not sure, but I feel like that might have been the thing that tipped me off the most that something was up with him. He'd never been the sort to… smile.

The meaty dinners kept coming, and I began to wonder a bit about where he was getting it all. I talked to Leigh about it, who generally deals with supplies and acts as a sort of quartermaster, and she told me she'd definitely stocked up on plenty of canned and frozen meats for Cook before we set out, though only he'd been keeping track of what we actually had left. But it wasn't that I thought he didn't have the meat available, it's that I just didn't know how he seemed to make it all taste so *fresh.* By that point I was pretty much convinced that whatever was going on with Cook was outside the area of the natural, and that usually traced back to one of the items I was carrying for sale. The fact that I'd just given something to Cook, well it tracked too closely for me to not come to some… *obvious* conclusions.

I started to avoid eating the meat I was served, kept my feeding to the small portion of vegetables that he'd add to the side, more a garnish than anything else. It didn't escape my notice that Cook was also hiding increasing amounts of his arm inside his coat when he spoke to me. First fingers, then the hand, then final y he kept the

whole forearm tucked under his jacket so I couldn't get a decent look. When I thought about it I'd get visions of Cook slowly reaching in, cranking the handle wildly with the other arm, while he pushed his skin and flesh into the whirring iron, mouth open and smiling, as it began to come through the mincer grate like a string of meaty bubbles. It made me feel ill, but I just couldn't get it out of my head.

So a few days out of port, I snuck into the galley when he wasn't in. I mean, it was my ship, so I shouldn't have felt like a thief sneaking around, but I did. Secured over the hobs was a bubbling pot of water that Cook was gradually turning into stock. At first I didn't know what it was that made me so uncomfortable about the sight. Then I realised that he was making it the same way you make most meat stocks: he was boiling up some bones. And I am a hundred percent certain that Leigh did not supply us with *bones,* especially not the sort of bones I was seeing in that pot.

The meat grinder was there, clamped onto the side, a ways away from the main counter, and with no sign that it had ever been used. But there was something to it that alarmed me. When it had been in the box it was old, rust creeping at the edges. Not something you'd want to put raw meat through. But now the thing was spotless, like new, and as I got closer that… same smell that wafted off Cook got stronger and stronger.

Now I'm not one for hiding, or dodging a confrontation, but if this was happening like I thought, I really wanted to catch Cook in the act, see exactly what he was doing. So I went, and I waited until he

was in the kitchen, preparing dinner, and I just walked in. Well, I tried to walk in, but Cook had locked the door. I had my own key of course, but I was also aware of how flimsy the lock was, so in the interest of time, I just kicked it open.

In many ways, what I found in there was exactly what I expected, but in other ways… I don't know. Cook did have his right arm up to the elbow in the mincer, his left hand working the crank, around and around. I could hear the sound of bone and flesh grinding, but there was nothing coming out the other end of the machine. Then I saw what was lying on the counter. It was his arm, neatly sliced off and butchered into cuts of meat, the bone shining white through the blood and dark skin. And I remembered he'd promised us pork chop tonight.

Looking back at Cook, I saw the ecstasy on his face, with just a hint of manic terror, as he turned the crank, and a new arm came out, bit by bit, raw and glistening. It didn't look like his old one, but there was a part of me sure it would taste just the same.

It didn't look like he'd even noticed me breaking through the door. He was wrapped up in his own sickness. So I walked over and grabbed him by the shoulder, screaming to know what the hell he thought he was doing. That snapped him out of it alright, and he lunged at me with a sudden cry, ripping the lower part of his arm back off, and leaving it sitting there, ragged in the grinder. His left hand went to the boiling stock, blistering and peeling as Cook reached in and pulled out one of the larger bones, swinging it wildly about the place. I don't speak any Croatian, but given the

way he was salivating I'm pretty sure he was chanting something about dinner.

But in the end, he only had one arm, and wasn't thinking properly. His movements were clumsy, like a drunk, and even at his best I've killed worse than Cook. He went down easy. That's another good thing about having a crew you can trust. They tossed him overboard, and cleaned up without asking any sort of prying questions. Of course they belly-ached about another week on canned food, but I think they understood the alternative would have been worse.

Story has a happy ending, though. I managed to sell the grinder to some rich Canadian gourmet, who I assume was bored of the standard options for his meals. Didn't even have to leave anything out. Of course, he disappeared about a year later, and they never found the body. But there's no way to prove that had anything to do with me. Besides, it's not like he was paying me in instalments.

ARCHIVIST

Statements ends.

[DEEP SIGH]

I suppose in some ways it's strange I'm not a vegetarian yet, what with everything I know. But… I rather think someone in my position has to take their small pleasures where they can, and if it occasionally delights some grotesque meat-god, well… c'est la vie.

So Salesa was one of Leitner's old assistants. That makes some sense, I suppose. The sort of small revelation that a month ago would have filled me with wild conjecture. Now it seems, I don't know, almost trite. Filling in the puzzle, but not touching on those parts of the picture I still don't understand.

Maybe it's not that. Maybe it's just this… stillness, the anticipation. I – **We** know what's happening, we know what we have to do about it, we even have something approaching a plan for once. And while it's a welcome change not to be desperately praying for a *deus ex machina,* I don't really know how to handle the *waiting.* Whatever Elias has Daisy doing, it seems to be working. Nothing's made a move on me or the Institute since I returned, and last time I saw her there was the distinct smell of burnt plastic. So I suppose I'm safe. But everything just feels like… killing time, running down the clock. I don't think I like it.

God, do I – do I miss being chased? That's depressing. No, it's… I just miss feeling like I'm moving, like I –

[KNOCK, KNOCK]

[Calls] Come i–

[KNOCK, KNOCK]

[More sombrely] Come in.

[A NEW DOOR CREAKS OPEN]

[Sharply] What do you want?

HELEN

Not sure. To talk.

ARCHIVIST

You're keeping her face, then.

HELEN

I am Helen.

ARCHIVIST

Don't pretend to be people I know. Knew.

HELEN

I'm not pretending.

ARCHIVIST

You're **not** Helen Richardson.

HELEN

I wasn't Michael, either.

ARCHIVIST

Who do you see? When you, you look at yourself? There are mirrors in those corridors of yours. What do you see?

HELEN

I don't.

ARCHIVIST

…

Why are you here?

HELEN

I… I'm not… I'm not entirely sure. I'm… having trouble. I don't think I was meant to be Helen.

ARCHIVIST

I'm – I don't understand.

HELEN

Neither do I. Michael was… pulling away. His anger was interfering. I don't, I don't think I have a choice but to be Helen. Self is difficult.

ARCHIVIST

Michael, he, uh, he, he wasn't *meant* to be you either, though, was he?

HELEN

No.

ARCHIVIST

…

So…

[Slowly] Why are you here?

HELEN

I took someone.

ARCHIVIST

You t–

Wh… L-Like Michael ate you?

HELEN

I took a man, wandering the halls of an old tenement. He's dead now, he never even came close to finding me. It was nourishing, but…

ARCHIVIST

But…

HELEN

I didn't like it.

ARCHIVIST

You d– *[Sigh]* I'm not sure I follow.

HELEN

I feel… **wrong**. I feel this –

ARCHIVIST

[Angry] Why are you telling me this?!

HELEN

Something happened when I became 'Helen'. She wasn't right, she wasn't ready.

ARCHIVIST

I don't…

HELEN

Before, talking to you made Helen feel better.

ARCHIVIST

You're not that Helen!

HELEN

I just want… I just want to feel better.

ARCHIVIST

…

I don’t believe you.

HELEN

You don’t?

ARCHIVIST

Wh-what? Why should I believe… a-a-any of this? You’ve told me over and over that you’re… what was the phrase? The ‘throat of delusion’? All of this is –

HELEN

I have never told you a lie, Archivist. I wouldn’t dare. I, I just thought **you** might understand.

ARCHIVIST

Uh… How could I possibly…

HELEN

We’re both changing, Archivist. I had hoped, that together –

ARCHIVIST

[Furious] Get out.

HELEN

Archivist…

ARCHIVIST

Get. Out.

HELEN

Fine.

[A NEW DOOR CREAKS CLOSED]

[DEEP SIGH]

[CLICK]

MAG116 – The Show Must Go On

Statement #7870211

[CLICK]

ELIAS

Thank you all for coming.

[VARIOUS SIGHS AND EXASPERATED NOISES]

ARCHIVIST

Well, you said it was important.

ELIAS

Will Melanie not be joining us?

BASIRA

No. She won't.

ELIAS

Very well. I suppose that's understand –

ARCHIVIST

What do you want?

ELIAS

To help. Do you have your recorder running?

DAISY

‘course he does.

ARCHIVIST

I… yes.

ELIAS

Well, then, I’ll speak clearly. You will soon be attempting to stop something few have ever witnessed and fewer still have survived.

ARCHIVIST

Not alone.

BASIRA

We’re, um, I think we’re all going.

ELIAS

Yes. And I believe your plan – um, simplistic as it may be – does have a reasonable chance of working.

ARCHIVIST

Well, thank you.

MARTIN

Sorry, sorry, did we… I thought we'd only actually got as far as, well, we sneak in, plant bombs, when they're… distracted?

ARCHIVIST

Detonate them when the ritual starts; they're vulnerable.

BASIRA

I mean. I've got some plans of the museum, and the area around it, but, yeah. That's. That's it.

DAISY

It should work. It doesn't need to be fancy.

ELIAS

Well, quite. But given there is every likelihood but some or all of you might end up confronting the Stranger in a rather direct manner, I thought it best you have an idea of what you might encounter.

BASIRA

Oh.

ELIAS

During the difficulties with your initial absence, John, I took Gertrude's tapes into my safekeeping.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I thought as much.

ELIAS

There is one I feel it may be wise for you to hear. All of you. If I may?

[VARIOUS SIGHS AND EXASPERATED NOISES; SOMEONE MUTTERS "FINE"]

[CLICK]

GERTRUDE

Case 7870211. Abraham Janssen. Incident occurred in the Court Theatre Buda, October 1787. Statement taken from journal entry, dated the 2nd of November of that year. Committed to tape on the 4th of October, 2013. Gertrude Robinson recording.

GERTRUDE (STATEMENT)

Some months have passed now since the sights and sounds that excited in me that unknown and hideous mania. Yet still my hand shakes in the writing of it, such that I can scarce understand myself the marks I leave upon the page. I would hold myself the most ill-

used of men, were I not certain of others who left that theatre with wounds far graver than a tremor. I curse the name of Wolfgang von Kempelen and all his vile machinery, and there is no greater hope within me than that I should never again be required to lay eyes upon the Mechanical Turk.

I have always refrained from writing of it, but some years ago, at its creation, Kempelen prevailed upon me to play the Turk myself. I agreed, considering it a grand old joke, and a worthy use of my aptitude for chess. And some aptitude I had, indeed. In my youth, I even played a match against Philidor himself, in Old Slaughter's coffee shop, though he thrashed me soundly.

Most who would dismiss the Turk as a simple ruse or deception would posit that only a child could have crawled inside the base of it. But, at almost half a century, I was quite delighted to work my way between the gears and play the venerable puppetmaster to Wolfgang's infamous chess-playing automaton.

Most who would discover that a human mind directed the Turk found that fact cause enough to dismiss the marvel of the thing. But to do so would have been a grave disservice to Kempelen's singular skill. For, though I may have chosen the movements, and played the game that unfolded above my head, the motions of the machine were the result of an ingenious array of gears and mechanisms that I could never hope to understand. It was an astounding feat of engineering, even if the mind behind it could not be replicated by clockwork and springs.

At least, not when it was first constructed.

I must not, however, allow my regard for Wolfgang's intellect to distort the most appalling horror that his creations precipitated upon that stage. Nor to hide his complicity and guilt in what occurred.

He was a strange man. For as long as I knew him, his manner caused me disquiet, and I attribute the continuation of our acquaintance in no small part to our difference in language. We had some commonality in French, but I often felt there to be much nuance in his words that was simply not conveyed between two men, neither of whom was speaking his mother tongue. Indeed, on some few occasions when I observed him conversing in Hungarian or German, the expressions I observed upon the faces of his interlocutors were invariably those of discomfort or alarm. Wolfgang von Kempelen had within him some strange dream, I think. Some secret ambition, that might be glimpsed when his eye fell upon his automata. But it always eluded me.

Our initial meeting was civil, even pleasant. He had by then completed his construction of the Turk, and had requested several of his compatriots to seek out those who might have some small skill at the game of chess. I was at the time traveling in Austria, and introductions were made by a mutual acquaintance by the name of Lanthorn. Wolfgang explained to me the concept. That I would be secreted within the base of the machine, and direct the figure on how to play the game taking place upon the table. I agreed almost immediately.

Perhaps I would have had more reservations, had I known the unveiling would take place before the Empress Maria Theresa. Or if, when I agreed, I had actually laid my eyes upon the Mechanical Turk.

What description of it should I give? Should I speak of its costume, the rich Ottoman colors, lined with fine fur? Or the dreadful stillness of its dark shining face, the unmoving painted eyes that met mine and could not see me recoil? The torso simply ended as it disappeared below the table, and when I held my nerve enough to climb into the tiny chamber below it, some small part of my soul cried out that I was devoured within the belly of the cruel device.

Despite this, our exhibition to the Empress was a triumph, and I retreated from it both elated and utterly unsuspected. Indeed, such was the breadth of my success, it carried me through another year, traveling with Wolfgang and operating the Turk. I will not pretend that there was no joy to be had in my position; both displaying the marvelous engineering, and using my own prowess at the game of chess to fool great crowds of onlookers. Yet even then, nothing could fully quiet that odd anxiety I felt when I looked upon the Turk. Nor the strange and intricate dreams I had of it.

But eventually, my business in London required my return, and Wolfgang had other projects to which he wished to devote his attention. Most notably, a grotesque speaking machine, that he insisted would someday be capable of mastering human speech. I saw many of his designs. The bellows that aped the work of lungs, the wooden box of valves and pipes, and that most grotesque mouth

he had constructed of some awful undulating substance he claimed was derived from an Indian tree. To dissuade him from his conviction that it would someday be capable of rendering intelligible speech was impossible. But hearing the mournful wail that came from the spasmodic thing he called a mouth, I fervently prayed I would never have to be there when it did so.

A prayer that went unanswered.

Wolfgang von Kempelen and his automata were far from my mind when I received the invitation from him, some fifteen or sixteen years having passed since we had any cause to forgather. I was once again in Austria, through coincidence, and received his letter in the dying days of summer, imploring me to attend a grand performance at the newly completed Court Theatre of Buda, many miles east in Budapest. It was not an insignificant journey from Vienna, but Wolfgang's letter pleaded that I be there. I was, so it would have me believe, indispensable in my attendance, as "the oldest friend of the Turk."

This line, I will confess, filled me with an apprehension that bordered almost on bone-deep fear. Though at the time I had no cause to heed such a feeling. My reason told me there was nothing to this but an oddly insistent invitation from an old friend, and I resolved to attend, if only to conquer the unaccountable terror that had taken residence within my heart. A terror, I now know, I should have heeded in every respect.

I shall waste no time detailing my journey to Budapest, and all my

numerous failures to locate Wolfgang once I arrived. I did make some small inquiries about the court theatre, and learnt something of its history. Namely, that it had formerly been a Carmelite monastery, until Joseph II had had it dissolved three years prior, and commissioned Kempelen to convert it into the city's first theatre. The cells had now been taken for the actors' dressing, and the crypt remade into a trap room beneath the stage, which had, itself, been placed where the high altar of the chapel once stood. Perhaps this should have stirred some further apprehension within me. But the changing fortunes of Eastern churches seem so far away from Wolfgang and his strange machines that I paid it hardly any mind.

The date came at last, and it was with no small trepidation that I made my way to the Court Theatre of Buda. No tickets had been issued to me, nor had I seen any way in which they might have been acquired. But upon my approach I noted several other figures, finely-garbed, making their way towards the theatre with the expressions that mirrored my own.

The doors of the theatre were open, and standing at either side of each entrance were things that, on first appraisal, appeared to be men. As I approached, however, I recognized the stiff motions and lifeless faces I had marked so sharply on the Turk. Dressed as gaudy footmen, automata silently gestured us inside, with unnatural jerky motions of their arms and heads, so violent that I would have thought it no surprise had they been hurled from their sockets. More were within, and I was struck by the absence of any flesh and

blood ushers. Everywhere I turned, there seemed to be more ticking, whirring figures of clockwork, wood, and metal.

Seeking some reassurance, I tried to make some comment to another guest beside me, but found a cruel brass hand, awful in its strength, gripping me by the shoulder, and leading me away. I was walked to a balcony where I was, I supposed, to be seated. Fearful and confused, I acquiesced to the silent instructions of what I had begun to consider my captors. Even when other, equally-alarmed, spectators were seated beside me, I refrained from addressing them, feeling as I did the unchanging faces of those mechanical beings staring down at me.

Before each seat, there stood a small metal cage, within which hung a minute mechanical bird as might be used to delight children. But the angles of the creatures had been worked to a razor's sharpness. And there was something in the metal orbs that stood for eyes that I could not bring myself to look at. The theater fell silent every seat filled with quiet watchers, curious as to what might be about to take place, but dreading the answer we were to receive.

Then all eyes fell upon a figure in the center of the stage, and I immediately recognized the Mechanical Turk, sat at its false table. Its head raised itself slowly, shuddering from side to side, and looked out over the assembled crowd. Its coat was not as I had seen it, the fine fur now gone, and in its stead something hairy, coarse, and brown that hung loosely about its shoulders.

There was a single nod, and a crack like brittle steel. And every

false bird began to sing. It was not the gentle chimes of a hidden music box. Rather, the horrendous piping wail of creatures in pain, at such a pitch and volume that it seemed no two birds could be anything but discordant. Had I dared raise an arm, I would have covered my ears, but I'm certain that would have been no protection.

As the sound echoed through my skull, I saw the Turk lift something, inch by inch, over its head. A long, curved sword was gripped in its rigid fingers, the point aimed squarely at the chessboard in the table before it. The arm rose as the chirping intensified to a scream. Then came a single, swift downward motion, of such force that it pierced right through the wood, and buried the blade deep into the space beneath.

The birds ceased their infernal chorus for a long moment, as blood began to flow gently out from beneath the base, pooling under that device that had haunted my dreams for fifteen years. Then they began again, louder and more furious than before. At this, the machine moved once more, faster now, and with a shaking and shuddering that did nothing to slow its motion, it placed something upon the table. I saw bellows, a wooden box, and a soft and hideous throat that seemed to twist and pucker on its own.

Then the Mechanical Turk did something that I do not believe will ever fully leave my thoughts, no matter how fervently I might wish it. It stood up. It had no legs, and made no secret of. Yet still it stood, stepping away from the table that was its very being. And it began to dance.

As it did so, the bellows left upon the bleeding table started to pump, and I heard again that mournful wail of Wolfgang's speech machine, as the end of it flailed and bulged until at last it shrieked its words to the audience. I do not know what it said, and I thank almighty God that I speak no Hungarian.

There was then a moment of absolute nothing, wherein I swear that none of us existed within the world. When I returned to being, the mouth upon the altar was speaking English, but I no longer understood it and I cried to the jailer in a language all my own to let me out of my chair. But the chair was nothing but a stone, and his face was too much of skin not to scream. The wooden man in the seat next to me tried to seize my hand, but I no longer possessed any, so I curled my legs into a fist and struck it again and again until my eyes were full of sweet sherry, and the part of me that sang no hymns bit down and choked upon the soft wood.

I staggered, falling up onto the door, and opening it to a screaming clockwork heart, that begged me to stop as I unscrewed it from its moorings, and set it adrift upon the sky that dropped away before me. Nothing was anything, and nobody was what they did not pretend to be. I desperately wished to cry, but no longer had any understanding of what a tear was.

And then there came a noise I did know. Into the nothing that was everything came a thing that was most clearly a battle cry, though I did not understand the words of it, only the sense.

I looked away to see, inside, a man who was a soldier. I was sure he

was a soldier, and he was nothing but a soldier. His blades were blades and forged for killing and his mouth was a mouth and was made to order death. Beside him were four who were also soldiers, though their weeping eyes were empty sockets, and the captain led them by a rope around their necks. They dragged a thing that wasn't a thing, but instead a mouth upon a tree that hated the Turk and all it brought upon the world.

The soldier carved and cursed its way through a horde of vicious clockwork flesh men, with faces that cannot not have been my father, and shouted a command to the sightless followers that even I understood to be an order of attack. They took the burning sun from their pockets, and placed it upon the tree, and the mouth spat a curse so heavy it flew towards the altar, and struck the Turk square in the chest.

And, in that moment, everything was real once again. The sightless men, and the unknown soldier in his bloodied uniform, turned and dragged the cannon from the theater, paying no mind to the carnage that surrounded them on every side, the limp and unmoving bodies of automata and patron alike, nor the destruction they had wrought upon the stage. The cries and pleading of the wounded and dying rose up like an awful chorus, where before the air had been filled with the piping of metal birds. And, God may damn me for a coward, but I ran.

GERTRUDE

Final comments.

The Stranger and its ritual have proved remarkably hardy in many ways. Resistant to most of the standard interferences, and flexible in such a way that while the Unknowing is relatively easy to delay, full disruption seems borderline impossible. And yet, here we see what I assume to be an avatar of the Slaughter end an almost fully-realized ritual with, if not ease, then, at the very least, a direct simplicity.

Perhaps… that's it. Could it be that the closer the Stranger comes to emerging, the more damaging a physical disruption to its focus becomes…? And more research is needed, but if that's true, then the task becomes at once less complicated, and significantly harder. Disrupting the others has been successful largely because I was able to do so before they had reached any form of culmination. And from the description of Abraham Janssen, I would not be confident enough in my senses to attempt something similar once the Unknowing has become in earnest.

Hmm. It could probably stand as a solid Plan B, at the very least. And I might make inquiries about getting my hands on some… appropriate ordinance. This also confirms that they're still using that ancient skin as a focus item. If it wasn't destroyed by cannon fire, I imagine it will take some effort on my part to do so, but I'm now sure I know where they're keeping it. And if I'm able to take care of it, that may buy me a reasonable amount of time to research alternative methods.

All I can say for sure is that when the Unknowing begins, I certainly don't want to be inside it.

[CLICK] [CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

…right.

BASIRA

That's it, then?

ELIAS

It's unlikely to be identical. The Stranger is not known for its, um, consistency.

BASIRA

…but something *like* that? We can't trust what we see.

ELIAS

The familiar may seem strange, the strange, familiar.

ARCHIVIST

One long category error.

MARTIN

Well, isn't – I thought that was what the Stranger *wants*, you know, for us to *doubt* everything.

ARCHIVIST

No one said it was going to be easy.

ELIAS

Brilliant. I have been doing my best to prepare you, John, to see. You should hopefully have it a bit easier than the others.

ARCHIVIST

[sigh] Another of my “powers?”

ELIAS

More… an aspect of your becoming.

DAISY

You don’t say.

ELIAS

Uh… right. Regardless, it should, I hope, give you an edge. Otherwise, I would never suggest you go yourself.

ARCHIVIST

[sigh] What about Martin?

MARTIN

What about me?!

ARCHIVIST

He should stay behind.

MARTIN

What?! Why!?

ELIAS

[overlapping] Really?

ARCHIVIST

Too many people might attract attention

MARTIN

No, no! I can help! I've been reading the *statements!*

ELIAS

Quite right. Probably best he does stay behind.

BASIRA

What, so you have a backup if John doesn't make it?

ELIAS

I'm sure that won't be necessary –

MARTIN

[unhappy noises, overlapping] Hey! Wh-what, what!? No!

ARCHIVIST

Martin, just… you can do more good here.

MARTIN

What, sat around drinking tea until the world ends?! Or, you know, it doesn't. We hope.

ARCHIVIST

Melanie's not coming either. I think… I think she'll need you here.

MARTIN

…fine.

ELIAS

Glad that sorted! Now, unless there's anything else?

ARCHIVIST

Not if, uh… no.

ELIAS

Excellent. Well, it's a three-hour trip up to Great Yarmouth. I had Rosie book you all into a bed-and-breakfast near the museum.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

ELIAS

Oh, and, uh, John. Technically, I can't *stop* you, but I would heavily advise against bringing any… rogue elements.

MARTIN

You *can* just say "Tim."

ARCHIVIST

I will take it under advisement.

ELIAS

Hm. Anyway, don't worry about staying in contact, I'll know when it starts.

ARCHIVIST

Naturally.

ELIAS

Oh, that reminds me. Make sure you keep any receipts for expenses, assuming you wish to claim them back.

ARCHIVIST

And assuming we don't, you know, die.

ELIAS

Yes. If you die, I'm afraid you probably won't be able to claim your expenses. Now, if you'll excuse me?

[DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES]

[TIRED SIGHS]

BASIRA

Do you think he bought it?

MARTIN

We'll talk about it later.

ARCHIVIST

I doubt there'll be time, we need to go.

MARTIN

It's *fine.* We've got this, okay?

ARCHIVIST

…Okay.

DAISY

Come on.

BASIRA

Yeah, sure.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

So. He doesn't want you there.

TIM

And you?

ARCHIVIST

I… would rather have you where I can see you.

TIM

Good.

ARCHIVIST

You listen to the tape?

TIM

Yep. Sounds like fun.

ARCHIVIST

Do I need to be worried about you?

TIM

You reading my mind again, boss?

ARCHIVIST

I'm watching your face. Do you – are you going to keep it together?

TIM

Look. If you're worried I'm gonna go all… red rum and start hacking up random waxworks, don't be. I'm not gonna give us away. I want this to work.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

TIM

But I don't think it will. So I'm gonna take that axe of yours, and *when* it all goes wrong, I'm going down swinging. And when I do, you'd better take the chance and stay out of my way.

ARCHIVIST

Okay. I'm just… *[sigh]* Okay.

[CLICK]

MAG117 – Testament

Statement #0170208–A to F

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Jonathan Sims, head archivist of the Magnus Institute, London, Regarding the upcoming, um… operation. 2nd August, 2017. Recording taken direct from subject.

I-I wanted to get some thoughts down before, um… everything. We all should, actually. I'll, I'll maybe mention it to them.

It looks like it's decided. Myself, Daisy, Basira, and, uh, Tim are all going to be heading off to this House of Wax. We're to sneak in as best we can. Daisy will set the charges while we, what was the phrase she used, "run interference." Then we will set them off once the ritual begins. Gertrude's notes were pretty clear. Unless the ritual is underway, any damage we do can be easily repaired. But if we time it right, it'll be centuries, maybe, before they can try again. Of course, if we time it wrong…

Daisy's been pretty clear that she thinks the best chance of success would be for her to go in alone, and, honestly, I struggle to disagree. But Tim isn't going to sit home and wait, and Elias seems pretty insistent I go along. Part of me thinks it's just so he can see if

whatever this “preparation” he’s been trying to do on me works. You know what? That same petty little part of me rather hopes it doesn’t. That all this time, all his cryptic nudges and “learn to fly by falling” attitude, ends up being a complete waste of time. Just to show him. Even so, I, I… it wouldn’t feel right to not go.

I think Basira is the same. She’s coming along to back up Daisy, or so she says. I don’t quite get those two. I suppose what they’ve done, seeing what they’ve seen… it’s a hell of a bond. The sort of thing I’ve mostly done alone. Still, it does sometimes make it hard to fully *trust* them…

You, you know what, no. I’m, I’m done with that. No more paranoia. It’s almost got me killed more than once, and Georgie was right. If I am, uh, slipping then I need people I can trust. And I… I don’t think that can happen naturally for me an-anymore, so I’m making a decision. I trust them. All of them.

Ex-except Elias, obviously, that’s not – I mean – I’ve listened to the tapes. I’ve listened to the tapes, and I know what they talk about behind my back, how much they’ve… suffered because of this place. Because of me. God. Poor Melanie.

And… aside from some, uh, uh, office gossip which I, I’m not sure is necessary or, uh, conducive to a workplace that… hey, it, it, it’s natural it’s, it’s normal. There’s, there’s no there’s no sinister hidden motives or… it’s fine. It, it’s fine.

So, I guess… sometime in the next few days, I go on a commando

mission to blow up a wax museum. ‘s not exactly what I was expecting from an archiving job. I do worry about Martin and Melanie, and leaving them behind with… I suppose that’s part of trusting someone isn’t it? Letting them help how they can.

Oh, yeah, I found something on the other body the circus stole *[laugh],* this “George Icarus.” Apparently he was interred earlier this year. I did a bit of *[laugh]* digging, and it looks like the plot and the headstone were paid for by… the Magnus Institute! And I can think of only one man who died within the last few months who the Institute would want buried under a pseudonym. Only one who spent his life so close to fear that his skin would be useful in a ritual like this. I don’t know what to actually *do* with this information, but… god. Jurgen Leitner. I just can’t be rid of him.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

BASIRA

Statement of Basira Hussain, 2nd August, 2017, at the request of Jonathan Sims.

I don’t, I don’t really know why I’m here. I mean, I know how I got here. All the decisions I made, until suddenly: yep, this is my life! But not the *why.* Not really. Does that make sense?

[sigh] I don't want to be here. But by the end, I didn't want to be police, either, so, guess I don't really know what I do want. Which… maybe that's just as well. My options… they've gotten a lot narrower over the last year. I don't know, I feel kind of bad. Everyone seems to be having a much worse time of it than me, but I was meant to be the hostage. It's amazing how much you can ignore when you keep your head in a book.

My dad would hate me talking like this. He couldn't stand people who just passively moaned about their problems. He always said, if you don't like something, you accept it and you adapt, or you fight and you change it. Whining doesn't help. I always tried to live like that. But I think sometimes you feel like you're adapting, but it's just denial.

But not anymore. I'm going to fight, and change it. I just hope I'm not heading into the wrong battle. I suppose if John screws up, it wouldn't hurt the others to have a trained pair of hands to help. So, waxworks it is. I just wish it didn't feel so much like abandoning Melanie. And Martin.

But at least Daisy's coming. I mean, I know she's… difficult. Everything they say about her, it's true, it's fair. But, she's solid. She's a… a fixed point, and if she's there, I know exactly where I stand, exactly what I'm doing, relative to her. She has *no* doubts. We go in, we plant bombs, we leave, we blow it all to hell. Or, we die. I don't think I'll ever have clarity like that. Despite everything she's done, she's, she's still the best partner I ever had.

[sigh] I just hope John can keep it together. And Tim… gosh, Tim. I know they've been through a lot, but they've never taken something like this on before. And if it's anything like what we went after Rayner, it's going to get bad. The sort of bad you can only get through if you stay focused and keep a clear head. You choke down the fear – and not because it's feeding some weird horrible god, like John thinks, but because that's how you keep going.

I guess, I guess we're all just gonna have to do what we can, and see what comes out the other side. *[sigh]*

How the hell did I end up having to save the world?

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

MELANIE

Melanie King, 2nd of August, 2017. 11:23 p.m.

It's late. I don't know what time the others are leaving. Might be tomorrow morning, I guess. They don't really tell me that sort of thing. They're going to let me and Martin know when they're ready, when everything's about to actually kick off. I should probably wish them luck, and hope that there isn't going to be some kind of horrifying apocalypse, but it's rather hard to hope for anything at the moment. Hope isn't really good for anything it's always been

action with me. It's, it's been doing things that helps. I've never really seen the point of hope.

I know why I'm not a part of this action. I, I do have my own stuff to take care of. They think they're giving me a chance to face my demons by helping to take down Elias. They don't get that the only way to deal with something like him is to watch his eyes go dead with your hands around his throat. I'll play it their way, for now, but when it comes down to it, I want to see him dead.

I, I'm so angry just sometimes, when John's going off on one about his latest insight, it's all I can do not to punch him in the teeth. I feel like I've always been fighting. No one makes space for people like me. You've got to elbow the comfortable idiots out of the way, and then claw your way up with gritted teeth. I've had to struggle for everything.

I know it sounds stupid to call starting a ghost hunting show a fight, but it was tooth and nail, and I won. And then I went to that hospital, and I met John, and it all fell apart, but I'm still fighting. For all the good it's done me. Still stuck, still miserable, still angry. New traumas, but they hurt just like the old ones. Elias thinks he's got this ingenious way to hurt people, but it's just the same old bullshit in a creepy new package. God, I just want to rip –

When did I start to lose the parts of me that weren't just anger? Hmm. So, if you listen to this, John – if you survive – I know you wanted a statement about my trip to India. So, well.

In 1919, British troops massacred almost a thousand unarmed civilians in Amritsar. You know I was looking into specters of war and violence, and I found reports that these soldiers' ghosts were still manifesting. I did my research, and I figured out where and when I thought it was going to happen next.

I told you what I was doing, and then I went to see for myself. I was right. They did manifest, but they weren't what I thought they'd be. They were fused, somehow, all mixed together, a huge angry mass of dead flesh and guns. I ran away, obviously. I ran away. It wasn't like it could chase me. But it turned out their bullets were more solid than I'd have guessed for ghostly antiques, and one of them got me. I had it sewn up at the hospital. Said I'd been mugged, although the scans couldn't find anything in there.

And then, I came home. So, yes, that's it, that's all you're getting. Because it hurt like hell to live through, and I didn't do it so you could stroke your chin and call it fascinating.

Good luck, John. I do hope you win. But I also hope it hurts.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

MARTIN

Um, statement of Martin Blackwood, on the night of his colleagues'

departure. Statement given direct, August 3rd, 2017. Statement begins.

I, I'm scared, I guess. – no, wait. No, no, I mean, aww, I don't want that to be my last message, the thing that defines me. "Martin Blackwood, he was always scared, then he died. The end." I don't want that.

But it's true, isn't it? I mean, if you're right, if these *things* out there are eating our fear, then I'm a luxury smorgasbord, I suppose. I'm just afraid all the time.

I know, I know, I'm not gonna die, I'm not even going to be on the incredibly dangerous mission. Me and Melanie, well… I don't think death is really the worry. It's just, this feels like an ending? Or, something? Like nothing can go back to normal after this. Hey, hey, I mean what's normal, right? Is- is living in old document storage normal? Is losing a friend and not even noticing normal? Corridors; evil, all-seeing managers… Suppose you can get used to anything.

But… this feels different. I need them to be safe, I need him to be okay. So-sorry, umm. I'm not afraid for me, though. Isn't that weird? I mean, it's not like I'm going to be safe, like my plan's not dangerous, but it's, it's mine. This last couple of years, I've always been running, always hiding, caught in someone else's trap, but, but now it's my trap, and, well, I think it'll work. I know, I know it's not exactly intricate, but it felt good leaving my own little web.

Oh, oh, Christ, I hope John doesn't actually listen to these. "Good

lord, is Martin becoming some sort of spider person?" No, John, it's an expression, chill out! Besides, spiders are fine. I mean, yes, people are scared of them, obviously, but actual spiders, they just want to help you out with flies.

Anyway, I guess I'm just sick of sitting on my hands drinking tea and hoping everyone's okay. This way, I finally get to *do* something. It's gonna hurt, but I'm ready. And I *want* to. Also, I get to burn some stuff, so that's cool! I just really hope everyone makes it back.

And I want to win on my own.

Oh, and I hope the world doesn't end. Obviously. Just… just don't *die,* John. Or, or Tim, Basira, or… Daisy, I guess? Just… everyone please make it back home?

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[SIGH, CLATTERING SOUNDS]

DAISY

Okay.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

TIM

All right. I don't know what you are, I don't even know if you're listening, I don't care. Just, if you're there, I want you to know that I *hate* you. I *hate* you for, for witnessing what's happened to us.

I used to blame my brother for going off his own and poking around where he wasn't wanted. I used to blame myself for not helping him. But now… now it doesn't matter. I've read through enough of these things to know that this doesn't matter. The only thing you need to have your life destroyed by this stuff is just bad luck. Talk to the wrong person, take the wrong train, open the wrong door, and that's it!

I'm gonna *hurt* them, though. I'm gonna *hurt* the thing that stole my brother and wrecked my life. I'm the distraction. If it looks like any of the circus folk, mannequins, whatever, are gonna see the others, I'm to make the biggest mess I can, draw them away, keep them busy. *[laugh]* I know what it means. They gave it to me because they think I'll get angry and do something stupid anyway. And they're probably right. So maybe it's for the best.

You know, for the longest time, I thought the secret was in balance. In some dusty old architect's work on symmetry. But he failed, didn't he? What was he even *trying* to achieve? He lived like anyone else, he died like anyone else. Whatever he was looking for in his "balance and fear," I don't think he found it. From what I can tell,

there's only one person who's ever managed to hurt them – to *really* hurt them. And that's Gertrude Robinson. She was cold, ruthless, and she hit them when they were vulnerable, and she sacrificed a *lot* of people to do it.

Honestly, I hope that John learned something from her because, because I don't expect I'm going to be coming back from this. I don't know if I want to. And if he needs to pull the trigger, to *use* me to stop it… well, he'd better have the guts to do it.

Timothy Stoker, August 4th, 2017. *[laugh]* Statement ends.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

That's it, then. I think. Except, uh… I, uh, I haven't burned it.

Gerard's page… Gerry. I-I know there's more he could tell me – he-he, wouldn't of, of course, I, I know that but he, he… he would still *be* there, th-that, that knowledge, i-it would, it would still *exist*…

I,I,I can't… I want to help, I-I want to… but I, I'm scared…

I'm on tape, just, just, just do it! **Do it!!**

[PAINED FUMBLING SOUNDS]

[SOUND OF BURNING]

…y-you owe me one, Gerry. Rest in, uh…

Just rest.

[CLICK]

MAG118 – The Masquerade

Statement #0170608–A/B

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

MARTIN

Are you listening?

[He takes a deep breath.]

Good.

[We hear him flip through some files.]

Case, uhh, 0071304. Statement of Ivo Lensik.

[He breathes out again, then flicks open a lighter.]

(your loss) Alright.

[He sets the statement alight and lets out a long breath.]

Statement ends, I guess. Um…

[He looks through some more statements.]

Harold Silvana. 0020406. You'll probably do.

[He lights this statement aflame too. There's a clear glee in his voice as he continues; what's up with that?]

All right then. 0140207. Dylan Anderson. Yeah? *(pause)* Okay.

[He sets it on fire.]

(sing-song) There's plenty more on the pile…

[There's a sharp knock-knock-knock at the door. It's Elias, and he doesn't sound happy.]

ELIAS

Martin. Martin, open the door.

[He jiggles the doorknob in a fruitless attempt to open it.]

MARTIN

Sorry, Elias. I can't hear you. There's – a door in the way.

ELIAS

Martin, I do not have time for this.

MARTIN

Then maybe you should *make* time.

ELIAS

Unlock the door. Now.

MARTIN

I thought you had a key.

ELIAS

Martin.

MARTIN

I'm not going anywhere.

[Elias knocks once more against the door in frustration, then stalks off, presumably to get the key.]

MARTIN

I would hurry, though, if I were you.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. WAXWORKS]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[There's a low, almost windy sort of constant background noise. Everyone (John, Daisy, Basira, Tim)'s voices echo a little more than usual.]

DAISY

Come *on*.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[He makes a sound of extreme disgust – it almost sounds like he's straining with something.]

DAISY

Shut. Up. It's just cobwebs.

ARCHIVIST

There's no such thing as *just* cobwebs.

[Everyone around him sighs. Their sighs are weary, as if they've heard this, or some variation thereof, before.]

ARCHIVIST

I don't like it.

TIM

Tough. Is this it?

BASIRA

Yeah. We plant the last of it here, and this place will go up nice.

ARCHIVIST

What's the range on the detonator?

TIM

Same as the last time you asked.

[In the background we can hear the sound of Daisy unzipping the explosives bag.]

BASIRA

Where is everybody?

ARCHIVIST

Preparing, I – I guess. Haven't seen any of them since the last of, uh, whatever the hell that was went inside.

[Rustling sounds.]

BASIRA

It's too quiet.

ARCHIVIST

It could be a trap.

DAISY

And? If it is, I give this a squeeze, no more trap.

BASIRA

And no more us.

[Daisy makes a noncommittal noise.]

TIM

[Don't fret] it. And anyways, it's not like we're alone in here. *(Laughs)* Look. There's Prince Charles.

[Everyone groans.]

TIM

Oh, if he'd been in an accident. Or, the Beatles! If they'd all been in separate accidents, like, like Ringo –

[Basira(?) sighs.]

TIM

– was in a horrible fire, or Paul was in a car crash, that's a classic –

ARCHIVIST

Yes, Tim. I remember them. The waxworks are… bad. *(A mechanical sound begins)* Just keep an eye on them.

If they start… moving, hit them with an axe.

TIM

Sure.

[Pause.]

BASIRA

John…

ARCHIVIST

Yes?

BASIRA

When you were, um, kidnapped, did you leave a tape recorder here?

ARCHIVIST

What? I don't – I don't think so, why? Is there –

[Silence as eyes go to the tape recorder.]

ARCHIVIST

Oh.

BASIRA

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

For god's sake.

BASIRA

So where did it come from?

ARCHIVIST

Not important right now.

BASIRA

John, it's – d–

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I'm *aware.*

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. ARCHIVES]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Rustling of papers. A crackling begins as Martin lights another statement on fire.]

MARTIN

Hello?

ELIAS

What are you doing.

MARTIN

That one, that one was Benjamin Hatendi. You weren't fast enough with the key!

ELIAS

What. Are. You. Doing.

MARTIN

Oh, I'm sorry, can you not just *look* into my head? Read my mind?

[The fire crackles.]

What's wrong? Too busy trying to keep an eye on everything?

ELIAS

Tell me what you're doing, and *why*.

MARTIN

I just thought I'd, you know, drop a couple of ideas in the old suggestion box.

[He picks up another statement.]

Turns out my suggestion is…

[He sets it alight.]

Fire.

[Elias sighs in a way that sounds like he's trying to keep himself from saying or doing something.]

ELIAS

And yet you haven't set the whole Archives alight. So I assume this is… what's it called. A cry for attention.

MARTIN

Maybe I just thought it might hurt.

ELIAS

No more than you're hurting yourself by acting out.

MARTIN

Oh, so that's it, isn't it. Martin's just acting out. I mean, Daisy's a "rabid dog," and Melanie's a potential killer, Tim's a – a *rogue element,* but Martin, oh Martin's just acting out. He'll have a cry, and a lie down, and feel much better.

ELIAS

(done) And if you're trying to convince me otherwise, then you are failing. Now, if you're quite done, I am very busy.

MARTIN

Oh, sorry. Sorry, I'm not – keeping you from the show, am I? Well – well you head back. I'll keep myself busy here. Albrecht von Closen is next, I think.

[There may be a quiet '*oh*' in the background here.]

He's quite an old one. Should go up very quickly.

ELIAS

[Elias takes a deep breath.]

Did John put you up to this?

MARTIN

You think I'm doing this for him?

ELIAS

No. It's just the sort of half-baked scheme he'd come up with, and I am well aware that you'd do just about anything for him.

MARTIN

(overlapping) I would *[unintelligible]* –

ELIAS

(cutting off) And I don't need to read your mind for that one.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

Do you really –

[He cuts himself off, composes himself.]

Is it so hard to believe that I hate you as well?

ELIAS

No. It's just hard to imagine that you would act on it.

[Disbelieving laugh from Martin.]

MARTIN

You think I'm what – I'm, I'm, I'm, um, blind?

ELIAS

Oh, no. You've made that quite clear.

MARTIN

So what? I don't get to be angry? I don't get to burn things? Just, just run around, making tea, while everyone else gets to actually have feelings?

ELIAS

Please get to the point, Martin.

MARTIN

Maybe there isn't one. Alright? Maybe –

ELIAS

Maybe you're just wasting my time.

MARTIN

Yeah. Yeah, maybe.

ELIAS

I see. That puts me in a… difficult position.

MARTIN

Good.

ELIAS

You might want to turn the tape off, Martin.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. WAXWORKS]

ARCHIVIST

How much longer?

DAISY

(through gritted teeth) I don't. Know.

ARCHIVIST

The others didn't take this long.

DAISY

The others had clear structural weaknesses. This room doesn't.

TIM

How hard can it be to blow up one building? All this… stuff!

DAISY

It *depends*. Lots of other buildings close around it, I was told to be *careful*.

TIM

Right. *Fine*.

BASIRA

So would you say this was supposed to be Churchill or Alfred Hitchcock?

[John lets out a breath.]

ARCHIVIST

Jowls like that, could be either. I mean, the *[unintelligible]* is a bit – *Tim!* Leave it!

TIM

We should know what's going on. How close they are.

ARCHIVIST

We are *not* ready yet! If you start opening doors and they see you –

TIM

Are you sure it's through there?

ARCHIVIST

I, I, I, I'm *pretty* sure. I saw it a few times while I was here, they've knocked through most of the middle, ho-hollowed it out, made a sort of auditorium.

BASIRA

How big?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know! Big!

BASIRA

I mean, it's not a huge building.

ARCHIVIST

I **don't know**. Tonight was my first time seeing it from the outside. At least in the… flesh. I guess it does seem, m, smaller?

[Silence.]

BASIRA

You're sure this is the right place?

ARCHIVIST

I *am*. This is definitely where they kept me. Although I don't remember quite this many waxworks.

BASIRA

Alright. I just don't want to get this far and find out we're in a –

[She's cut off by a strange music seeming to come from the other side of the door.]

ARCHIVIST

This is the place.

[He takes a shaky breath.]

TIM

We need to see what's going on in there.

ARCHIVIST

Just ignore it. We have a job to do.

BASIRA

Jesus.

ARCHIVIST & TIM

What?

BASIRA

It moved.

ARCHIVIST

Right, okay, if they're starting to, ah, We've got to go.

BASIRA

No, like – it was just – it's just a flicker in his eyes. Look at it –

ARCHIVIST

Don't – Look, if the waxworks are coming alive, we *need* to go.

BASIRA

Just shut up and look.

[Silence but for the background melody as they do.]

BASIRA

Huh.

ARCHIVIST

Oh god… Oh god, they're not waxworks.

TIM

What do you – Christ.

ARCHIVIST

Tim, I – I think – I think maybe we had better see what's going on

in there.

TIM

Alright. Alright. On three. *(pause)* Three.

[They open the door. The music grows louder.]

ARCHIVIST

Oh…

TIM

Holy –

ARCHIVIST

Yes. I suppose it is.

DAISY

Done.

ARCHIVIST

I, um. I think we might need all of it, Daisy. This place is, uh, it's bigger than we thought.

DAISY

Roger that. Give me a couple of minutes.

ARCHIVIST

S-s-sooner would be better.

[He starts breathing faster.]

TIM

What is it?

ARCHIVIST

Fear fuels everything, of course they need it, for a g-grand ritual…

BASIRA

What the hell is that thing? What's it doing to them?

ARCHIVIST

I, I think – I used to call it The Anglerfish. It's – I knew it took the skin, used it to coat people made of sawdust and stuffing, but now – I suppose I thought it just *ate* the rest. But no. It had a museum to fill with waxworks. And I guess you don't need skin to sing. *(shaky breath)* To join the choir.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. ARCHIVES]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

MARTIN

Hm. Sorry. Looks like it wants to know what's going on.

ELIAS

Hm. A pity. You know John listens to all of them.

MARTIN

What, you don't want him hearing your big evil speech?

ELIAS

Just wanted to spare you the small amount of dignity you have left.

[Martin laughs, but it's mirthless.]

MARTIN

Dignity? Right, yeah. Like the dignity of being trapped in your flat by *worms*, or sleeping in the Archives clutching a corkscrew, or, or fetching drinks for the *thing* that murdered your friend without you even noticing. Laughing, at all their little jokes, then being led to wander impossible corridors for *weeks*.

ELIAS

(sighing) Are you done.

MARTIN

Not even *close.* Because, I – *(composes himself)* I've been thinking. It's not like you got this all-seeing thing recently. You've had it the whole time. I remember the way you looked at Sasha after the attack. You *knew* it wasn't her. And I reckon you knew Prentiss was lurking under the Institute, too, and you did nothing. Why?

[Beat.]

[Martin slams his hand down onto the desk.]

Why?

[Beat.]

ELIAS

Let's just get this over with, shall we?

MARTIN

What, like with Melanie? Just that *perfect* bit of information to leave me a wreck?

[Elias takes a breath.]

ELIAS

Yes.

MARTIN

Well, I hope you've got something better than that pathetic dig at my feelings for John.

ELIAS

It's baffling, really. Such loyalty to someone who really treats you very badly.

MARTIN

Oh, is that supposed to be, what, a revelation?

ELIAS

You know, I really should have gone for that. Found something that would finally manage to shatter that precious image you have of him. But, as you say I am *very* busy at the moment. So I suppose I'll have to go with what I had prepared.

MARTIN

Do it.

ELIAS

Your mother. She's always been… difficult, hasn't she. You take care of her for years, feed her, clean up after her, and now, with her condition degrading even further, *she* is the one that asked to be moved into a home.

[Martin sucks in a shaky breath.]

To have it left to the nurses. *She's* the one that refuses your visits.

MARTIN

She's a-always been –

ELIAS

Strong-willed?

MARTIN

Stubborn…

ELIAS

No. No, Martin. You know the reason. Your mother simply hates you. You just don't know why.

It's not your fault, though I know that isn't any consolation. Just bad luck, really. How old were you when your father left? Eight? Nine? When your mother began to sicken, and he decided he was done with you both. Not old enough to remember him with any great clarity, *especially* when your mother refused to keep any pictures of him. She never recovered from that betrayal. He just tore her heart right out and took it with him.

The thing is, though, Martin. If you ever *do* want to know *exactly* what your father looked like… All you have to do is look in a mirror.

[Martin's breathing grows louder and shakier. There's a vague static in the background, still.]

ELIAS

The resemblance is quite uncanny. The face of the man she hates, who destroyed her life, watching over her. Feeding her. Cleaning her. Looking down on her with such pity.

MARTIN

(tearful) Shut. Up.

ELIAS

You want to know what she sees when she looks at you?

[Both Martin's sobs and the static grow louder; Elias is transmitting the memories and images straight into his mind.]

MARTIN

(through sobs) Oh god…

[He continues crying as the static keeps going.]

ELIAS

(hissing) Don't burn any more statements.

[Elias leaves, closing the door to the office behind him as

Martin continues sobbing. He's doing his best to compose himself, and he manages to do so just enough before the door opens again and Melanie comes in.]

MARTIN

Did you find anything?

MELANIE

Uh, yes, I found –

[She finally looks up and sees the state Martin's in.]

Jesus. Are you okay?

MARTIN

Do we have what we need?

MELANIE

I think so, yes. He didn't even have a safe, just a few locked drawers. It was – it was easy.

[Martin takes a shaky breath.]

MARTIN

We need to leave.

MELANIE

We need to kill him. Look at you. He needs to **die**.

MARTIN

No. No, I – I knew what this was gonna be.

MELANIE

It's not just for *you!* If we leave him alive –

MARTIN

Melanie. Melanie, please.

[Beat.]

[Melanie sighs.]

MELANIE

Alright. Let's get these somewhere safe.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. WAXWORKS]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

BASIRA

So what do we do?

ARCHIVIST

We *can't* help them.

TIM

So, what, we're just going to *leave them* to be *skinned alive*?

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) [And] what do you want me to do?!

TIM

Well, you brought me in as a distraction, right?

ARCHIVIST

What?

TIM

Let me do it. Go in, maybe you can get some of them –

ARCHIVIST

Tim, contrary to what you think, I did *not* bring you here to indulge your *death wish*.

TIM

That's not what this is.

ARCHIVIST

No?

TIM

No! You *knew* I might not be coming back –

ARCHIVIST

I knew *none* of us might be coming back, and I'm not going to let anyone get killed for nothing!

TIM

Well, except for those people in there.

ARCHIVIST

They're already dead!

TIM

Not all of them.

ARCHIVIST

(sudden yell, followed by immediate realization of need to whisper) I am **not** losing you as well!

BASIRA

[unintelligible, overlapping]… Look. Whatever we're going to do, we need to figure it out. Now.

ARCHIVIST

Fine.

TIM

Look. John, I –

DAISY

Done.

ARCHIVIST

What?

DAISY

It's all ready. Here.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. I – I thought you would want to, uh, do the honors.

DAISY

It's safer with you. *You* know when it needs to happen.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Okay, um, c-come on, then. Let's *go*. *(pause)* Tim, come on.

TIM

This isn't right.

BASIRA

At least it'll be quick.

ARCHIVIST

Tim, *please*. We have to go –

[The door creaks open. The music is louder, now.]

ARCHIVIST

Get back.

DAISY

Behind me.

[A new static begins.]

NIKOLA

(over speaker) Will the audience please take their positions?

[The static grows in intensity.]

NIKOLA

The show… has begun.

ARCHIVES TEAM

AAAAH.

[The static grows louder. In the background, the circus music intensifies, with a proper melody and beat finally recognizable. Amidst it all is the Archivist's breathing, loud and isolated against the background frenzy.]

ARCHIVIST

Jesus…

BASIRA

Get the hell away from me!

TIM

Where's – no!

DAISY

Don't move –

ARCHIVIST

Daisy! Daisy, i-it's me!

TIM

No!

DAISY

I said, don't move.

ARCHIVIST

Daisy!

[Something is slammed, or hit.]

[The circus music continues for a few seconds before fading out into the Magnus Archives theme.]

MAG119 – Stranger And Stranger

Statement #0170708

[CIRCUS MUSIC PLAYS]

ARCHIVIST

[echoing] Hello? I – anyone? What's – what's going on? What is this place? Where…

Help? Please? Anybody?

SARAH!NIKOLA

I'm somebody.

ARCHIVIST

[stammering] What? Who are you?

SARAH!NIKOLA

What an *excellent* question.

ARCHIVIST

You – you stay away from me.

SARAH!NIKOLA

“Sarah”, “Daniel”… sometimes I think I’m just not built for names. A hundred puppets, a hundred pointless names.

ARCHIVIST

I-I don’t understand.

SARAH!NIKOLA

Of course you don’t. You *can’t*. Not anymore.

ARCHIVIST

What? I don’t… I don’t… who are you?

SARAH!NIKOLA

[chuckling] It’s me, John. It’s Tim.

ARCHIVIST

John. John?

TIM!NIKOLA

Yes, that’s your name, and I’m Tim, your friend.

ARCHIVIST

Tim?

TIM!NIKOLA

Yes. John, you can relax.

ARCHIVIST

No – no, no, no –

TIM!NIKOLA

[overlapping] Everything is going to be alright.

ARCHIVIST

No, Tim, we've – we've got to stop it.

TIM!NIKOLA

Stop what?

ARCHIVIST

I…

TIM!NIKOLA

And how *are* you going to stop it?

ARCHIVIST

[stammering] I have, I have… I thought that this, this…

I – I don't know.

TIM!NIKOLA

Well, don't you worry. I'm sure we can work it out together.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, yes. Yes – Tim, I just I need a second, to… uh –

TIM!NIKOLA

Of course, John.

ARCHIVIST

John. Yes, that's – that's me.

TIM!NIKOLA

Give it to me.

ARCHIVIST

[disoriented] Yes, yes, if you could, I'd – I'd value your input on it…

TIM!NIKOLA

Tim.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, Tim. Tim.

TIM!NIKOLA

Now let's take a look at this.

ARCHIVIST

Please.

TIM!NIKOLA

Right now, what we have here is our handheld remote detonator.

ARCHIVIST

A what?

TIM!NIKOLA

It talks to a bomb.

ARCHIVIST

Wait. Wait, uh…

TIM!NIKOLA

I imagine if you'd used it, we'd all have come to quite a nasty end.

ARCHIVIST

That was – uh, that was –

TIM!NIKOLA

[giggling] Don't you worry, Archivist, it's all in good hands.

ARCHIVIST

I don't understand.

TIM!NIKOLA

And you never will again.

BREEKON

Hello, Daisy.

HOPE

You alright?

DELIVERYMEN (BOTH)

Daisy?

DAISY

No.

BREEKON

I'm sorry?

HOPE

Don't follow you.

DAISY

Leave… no.

BREEKON

Come on Daisy.

HOPE

Don't be like that.

BREEKON

It's me, Basira.

DAISY

No, you're not. Because nothing is anything. *Leave.*

BREEKON

And if I don't?

HOPE

What will you do?

DAISY

I'll kill you.

BREEKON

Will you now?

HOPE

Ooh, pretty scary. If you *can*, that is.

BREEKON

You don't even know what a gun is.

DAISY

I don't care.

[SOUNDS OF GORE AND THE DELIVERYMEN GROANING IN SHOCK. DAISY BEGINS LAUGHING.]

TIM

Get away from me!

BASIRA

[slurred] It's alright. I'm not – I'm not one of them.

TIM

Everyone is, this isn't – just get back.

BASIRA

Okay, okay who – who are you?

TIM

[agitated] I don't *know*, do I?

BASIRA

What can we do?

TIM

It's too late. There's *nothing*.

BASIRA

There must be. We just need to figure this out. I – I know I'm me…

TIM

So what's your name? Huh? Who exactly is "me"?

BASIRA

Doesn't matter. Names don't matter. I just… I know – I know I'm me and I know I'm here.

TIM

Bullshit, "*here*" is just – *[groans]*

BASIRA

There's things that – that they're not me, they want to hurt me, but. I don't want to hurt you.

TIM

I don't believe you.

BASIRA

I don't want to hurt anyone.

TIM

Get back!

BASIRA

No, we can do this, I – I can do this, I just need you to –

TIM

I *said* get away!

[SOUNDS OF STRUGGLE AND GRUNTING]

BASIRA

Don't… wait. I don't… I don't understand.

ARCHIVIST

It isn't – it isn't real.

NIKOLA

What isn't real, John?

ARCHIVIST

I-I-I don't know. None of this is real.

NIKOLA

But it is! Just because you don't understand doesn't mean it's a lie.

ARCHIVIST

Who are you?

NIKOLA

[unconvincingly] Why, I'm…. Tim of course! Who else would I be?

ARCHIVIST

You're not. You're not Tim.

NIKOLA

Oh, you caught me! I'm *Sasha*!

ARCHIVIST

Shut up!

NIKOLA

Really, it's me! Sasha… whatever-her-name-was! Back from the dead, just like you wanted!

ARCHIVIST

Get away from me or I swear, or I'll –

NIKOLA

Or you'll what? Hit me? Go on then, try it – make a fist.

ARCHIVIST

I… I…

NIKOLA

Do you even know which of these hands is yours?

ARCHIVIST

Stop… stop, stand still.

NIKOLA

Do you even know what a hand *is?*

GERTRUDE!NIKOLA

Pathetic.

ARCHIVIST

Wait. Wait, I – I know you.

GERTRUDE!NIKOLA

I would *hope* you do.

ARCHIVIST

How are you here?

GERTRUDE!NIKOLA

Don’t be obtuse, John. I’m here because you failed.

ARCHIVIST

I-I tried. I tried, I almost –

GERTRUDE!NIKOLA

You almost what? You almost *didn't* doom the world? No, you *almost* let reality be the plaything of a lazy, foolish liar.

ARCHIVIST

No, no – I would – I could have stopped them.

GERTRUDE!NIKOLA

How? You didn't even know what it was. Do you know how many people I killed to keep the world in one piece? The sacrifices I made, and you didn't even know what you were fighting.

ARCHIVIST

N-no, I didn't –

GERTRUDE!NIKOLA

I suppose it's of no consequence now, it's far too late.

ARCHIVIST

What can I do?

GERTRUDE!NIKOLA

[gleefully] You can scream, I suppose. Weep, maybe. Have you considered curling into a ball?

ARCHIVIST

Why are you doing this?

GERTRUDE!NIKOLA

I'm not. You know, it's probably for the best I'm dead. Can you imagine how I'd hate having to watch you fumble around as my replacement? I really cannot express how much of a disappointment you are.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, I didn't even –

GERTRUDE!NIKOLA

I fought for *years* to stop the Stranger in its tracks, you didn't even notice when they desecrated my corpse. And now look at me. You've made me part of their ritual. This is *your fault*.

ARCHIVIST

It is not. It's not, I didn't know. It's not my fault you died.

LEITNER!NIKOLA

[distorted] No, I suppose not. Me, on the other hand… *that* one is very much your fault.

ARCHIVIST

[despairing] No, not – not you as well…

LEITNER!NIKOLA

Oh, yes.

ARCHIVIST

He told… why – why didn't you warn me it would be like this?

LEITNER!NIKOLA

I hardly had the chance, did I? Before you left me to get my head bashed in. I understand, of course. You needed a cigarette? I suppose you should have remembered that smoking kills. *[giggles]*

ARCHIVIST

That's not – I don't know…

LEITNER!NIKOLA

Come now, Archivist. Surely you know what a cigarette is. Or a pipe?

ARCHIVIST

It's hard to think.

LEITNER!NIKOLA

If our earlier conversation was anything to go by, I hardly think you can blame your faults on the ritual. Your problems go far deeper than that.

ARCHIVIST

Just – give me a moment, please.

LEITNER!NIKOLA

You think that would help? Honestly, if I wasn't so dead I'd be impressed. I always thought my own hubris to be quite exceptional, but you've managed to somehow deliver more bad decisions into two years than I managed in a lifetime. But by all means take your moment.

ARCHIVIST

What do you want?

NIKOLA

I already have what I want, little Archivist! Now I just want you to join me for a dance!

[JOHN SCREAMS]

[DAISY GROWLS]

BREEKON

You killed him! Do you even know what you've done?

[DAISY BEGINS TO LAUGH]

BREEKON

You *stupid* animal.

DAISY

[growling] Kill you…

BREEKON

No.

[DAISY CONTINUES TO LAUGH]

Shame you don't know your own coffin. But you will. *[chuckles]* You *will.*

BASIRA

[talking to herself] Don't panic. Don't panic. Just close your…

[groans] Ignore it. ignore the uh… don't listen. Focus, think. This is a place. You are you and you're in a place now. If… if it's a place, and it's now, then… then… then it has an end. The other things, the…

[BASIRA GROANS IN FRUSTRATION]

Too much, too much. There's – there's too many. and they wanna hurt me so – so… you leave the place. You leave the place and the now. No place is forever. You know how to move, so do it. Pick a

where… then the move.

Good! Then – then keep moving. Keep moving until you find another place. A place you know… just keep moving. Keep moving.

NIKOLA

Do you feel it, Archivist? it's almost there, the new day.

GERTRUDE!NIKOLA

A terrible new world. It is all your fault.

LEITNER!NIKOLA

Though I suppose you never really had a chance.

ARCHIVIST

I *see* you.

NIKOLA

Do you now?

ARCHIVIST

Yes… yes. I see the sad clown, bitter and hateful. I see him finding his way into the circus where nobody knew him. I see him torn apart, becoming the mask, remade by a cruel ringmaster. Sometimes a doll, sometimes a mannequin, always hiding in

somebody else's skin. Somebody else's name.

NIKOLA

[petulantly] Not always. And it's far too late for any of that. Nothing you see can help you.

SARAH!NIKOLA

Not without the detonator.

NIKOLA

Really, Archivist! After all this preparation, all your research! All this magnificent grotesquery, and what – you were just going to blow it up?

SARAH!NIKOLA

Probably the hunter's idea. She killed one of the couriers.

NIKOLA

Oh dear, how sad.

SARAH!NIKOLA

She was also the one that damaged this shell.

NIKOLA

You have hundreds of shells, Sarah! And soon you will have tens of thousands. You can have your little girl within every dark corner of

the whole world!

SARAH!NIKOLA

Not until you finish the dance.

NIKOLA

Oh, just let me enjoy myself for a moment! This is a once in an eternity event after all.

SARAH!NIKOLA

This in-between is not as comfortable for all of us as it is for you.

NIKOLA

Oh, fine. Archivist, it's been a pleasure but I really must –

[TIM YELLS, NIKOLA GRUNTS]

ARCHIVIST

Wait, *no* –

TIM

I'll kill you. All of you!

SARAH!NIKOLA

Will you now.

[SOUNDS OF STRUGGLE BETWEEN TIM AND JOHN]

NIKOLA

Let them fight! It's adorable!

JOHN

[strained] Wait, Tim! What do you see?

TIM

[angered] I see my asshole boss!

Or – or… wait… wait.

NIKOLA

[displeased] Spoilsport.

SARAH!NIKOLA

Tim.

TIM

[snarling] Grimaldi.

NIKOLA

Once. A long time ago, before Orsinov made me. And sometimes, even now, for special occasions. Like your brother. *[distorted]* ***SHALL I?***

ARCHIVIST

Tim, what's in your hand?

TIM

[strained] It's… I don't… The detonator.

NIKOLA

That's quite enough from *you*, I think.

[JOHN YELLS]

And now *you.*

TIM

Go on, I'll race you. See if you can do it again before I can squeeze.

SARAH!NIKOLA

It's too late.

NIKOLA

The world is ours! That *toy* won't help you now.

TIM

So come and take it.

[PAUSE]

That's what I thought.

NIKOLA

I am losing my patience.

TIM

Back! Get back. That's right.

John. I don't know if you can hear me, but if you can… then I don't forgive you. But thank you for this.

NIKOLA

You idiot! Do you really make the world will fare any better under the Watcher? You think you're saving anyone?!

TIM

I don't care.

NIKOLA

You can't even save *him*!

TIM

But I can hurt you.

NIKOLA

It will *not* end like this.

TIM

[dryly] You sound stressed. You know I hear the great Grimaldi's in town. You should go see it, cheer yourself up.

NIKOLA

That's. Not. Funny.

TIM

I know.

[DETONATOR CLICKS, EXPLOSION GOES OFF BEFORE ABRUPTLY CUTTING]

MAG120 – Eye Contact

Statement #0170908

[CLICK]

ELIAS

Statement of Elias Bouchard, regarding the dreams of Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, currently unresponsive. Details pulled directly from subject.

Statement begins.

ELIAS (STATEMENT)

The Archivist does not know where he is, and in many ways that is correct, for to say that he was anywhere would be an error. He has no conception of his body, lying on that gray hospital bed, perplexing the doctors. Heart unbeating, lungs unmoving, but mind and nerves alive and firing wildly: everything but brain-dead.

But he is where he exists so often when his eyes are closed. He wanders the dreams he was given. A cold and well-cleaned room, sterile metal tables that overflow with a gentle trickle of blood.

[HUMMING/VIBRATIONS BEGIN IN BACKGROUND]

The hearts that beat upon them spasm and spurt without any sort of rhythm, and were they to stand still for but a moment, it might become clear just how wrong they are in their construction.

There are no strange figures standing over those tables – no mockeries of earnest learning. But in the center stands a weeping, bearded man in a lab coat. In his thin, vinyl-gloved hands, he holds an apple, that he dearly wishes otherwise.

The doctor cannot bring himself to look at the tables, so instead, looks to the Archivist, whose eye watches him, and cannot close. He tries to scream, to curse at the Archivist, pleading to him for peace, for rest. The Archivist watches as the blood creeps along the tiled floor and pools at the doctor's feet.

Desperate, he tries to throw the apple at his observer, but it is too late. The doctor has forgotten how the elbows work, and wrenches it to the side with a sickening crack. He tries again to scream, but he hasn't got the throat right, and the wheezing, half-choked gurgle that escapes would stir pity in the Archivist, if he had not heard it so many times before.

The Archivist waits, expecting to awaken, but there is nowhere for him to awaken *to.* No avenue of escape from these dreams.

He turns to see the familiar screen, the familiar woman beneath it. She looks up at him with an expression of recognition and weary dread. She types and types and types, her fingers a blur, flying across the keyboard, and yet never fast enough to outrun the

relentless words that flow like dark water across the screen that stretches off into the sky.

It hurts. She is shaking her head, defiant in her well-worn terror, and tries with every corner of her will to force back the rolling tide of words. *It hurts.* Her fingers are still, her hands raised to her mind, *trying* to think, *trying* to comprehend. *It hurts.*

She turns to stare at the Archivist. There is hatred in her eyes, and blame: an aching certainty that she is here because of *him.* He has brought her here.

He watches as she slowly brings the keyboard up to her lips, fighting against it every moment. She bites down, shards of plastic cutting her fingers as the words scroll unfettered across the screen for miles and miles and miles. And she is gone.

[BACKGROUND VIBRATIONS ACQUIRE A RUMBLING, INDUSTRIAL QUALITY]

The Archivist wanders. He is searching, though for what he does not know. He passes those places he can no longer watch – the silent wards of peeling skin, the empty warehouse of thick darkness and frightened children, the rusted train car that smells of eager, infectious hate.

All through it, the shadow is above him; the shape that gazes down upon him, bloodshot and unblinking.

The rain is still there, though it is empty. The long and desolate road, slick with the downpour; a police car's lights flashing over the unmoving van. The doors are open, and the too-familiar statues stand either side of the well-worn wooden box.

He looks around, his eyes scanning this forever road and the clouds of iron gray, looking for her, but she is not there. The Archivist expects – he hopes – to find the violence in her looking back at him, hungry for pursuit and murder. But the emptiness of the place is complete – the only sounds, the gentle singing of the box, and the pounding, bitter rain.

He knows the writing on the coffin has changed, though it is still carved deep into the splintered wood:

I Am For You.

He knows it is not addressed to him, but he reaches down and pulls the chains off all the same. It opens, and he walks slowly down the steps into the earth. But even as it closes above him, the great shadow still sees him.

There is nowhere in this universe that it would not blot out the sky.

The rough-hewn tunnels go down, down beyond anything but sodden earth and despair, until the Archivist arrives at the tunnels. Here he sees the train, twisted and pressed in on all sides, nothing but shrieking metal and cracked glass. He climbs inside, and takes his seat, mouth tasting of mud and soil, his eyes moving through the dust and grit unblinking.

The passenger is there, though she is, as always, stationary. Dry dirt trickles between her teeth as she smiles mirthlessly, seeing the Archivist has returned. She is relaxed, suspended from a dozen broken handrails and shattered, jagged seats. They cut her flesh, but she does not bleed. There is no pain in her eyes. There is nothing except the certainty of her fate.

The train begins to move, the wheels screaming with the awful weight of it, every part buckling and pressing in, but the Archivist is not afraid. His only fear is that even here, at the center of the world, barreling towards a lightless, infinite tomb, still, he will be watched. Still, *he* will watch.

The expression on the passenger's face does not change, even as the contorting metal crushes her skull like an egg, as she vanishes from view. He catches a glimpse of an advert above his seat: "Dig."

There is a door in front of him. A yellow door. He knows the dream it used to lead to; he knows it well. But that's not where it leads anymore. He does not know what is behind it anymore, and he is deathly afraid of finding out.

[HIGHER-PITCHED, TINNITIS-LIKE OSCILLATING SOUND ADDED TO BACKGROUND VIBRATIONS]

The Archivist turns away. Behind him are the ants. They move like a terrible rolling wave along the hard-packed ground, and he can see every twitching antenna, every clenching mandible. Somewhere, underneath that twitching, burrowing mass, is the

exterminator. He is screaming. The Archivist knows he is screaming, can *see* him screaming, although the sound is lost under the noise of those hundred million ants, that crawl and scurry over everything.

For a second, a hand breaches the shifting mound, desperately stretched towards the Archivist in supplication, pleading for help. The Archivist watches, as it disappears painfully back into that sea of scrabbling life.

Then all at once, the ants are gone, fled in a moment away from the still-shuddering form of the exterminator, and a familiar terror finally pushes its way into the Archivist's heart.

Before him rises an incinerator door, the glowing light of the flames curling around the cracks. With a wailing shriek, the door opens, and the burning silhouette that stands within is ingrained upon the Archivist's racing mind. They smoke and sizzle, but still the worms crawl through her charred and pockmarked flesh, her now-singed red dress shifting with the movement beneath it.

[OSCILLATION GROWS LOUDER]

The exterminator looks to her, then to the Archivist, and it is not certain which he fears more.

The Archivist, for his part, is hopelessly willing the dream to stop. But as she takes one scorched step after another, it is clear that he has no power to make it.

When faced with her, he even longs for the terrible dream of the melted woman, who would see everything desolated without rhyme or reason. But she was beyond his reach the moment she knew he was there, so the Archivist can only stand and stare, as the hive goes about its infested, long-dead work.

The dark building is newer, but he knows it well; knows the two lost souls who creep through it with an alert hunger on their faces. He recognizes that look from the other hunter, whose dreams he has watched for so long. They stalk the darkness itself, and hope to catch and kill it before it can do the same to them. They see him watching, but they cannot catch his scent.

At last, he is in the moonlit graveyard – the oldest of the dreams. It is peaceful, cool and damp, as the rolling, boggy fields stretch out in all directions. He hears her calling pathetically from the bottom of the graves, but by now he knows there is nothing he can do but stare. She begs to be released, to dream of this place no more, but there is nothing he can do.

So he watches her, trying in his single-minded focus to ignore the attention of that impossible thing that covers the sky, and fixes its gaze on him with such force it would choke him – were he breathing.

Another dissection room, another figure standing in its centre – but this one is calm. She simply looks at him sadly, a pity in her face that burns him worse than any flame. More than anything, the Archivist wants to look away, to turn his eye from her gentle

sadness, from the disappointment in what she sees in him.

But he cannot, so he watches her, until she simply fades away.

[GROWING METALLIC, ECHOING SOUND, FADING IN AND OUT]

And at last, the Archivist looks up. At last, he looks into the eye that sees all, and knows all, and clutches at the secret terrors of your heart. The Ceaseless Watcher of all that is, and all that was; the voracious, infinite hunger the tears at his soul, invoking him to discover, to observe, to experience all, and everything, and forever.

It stares into him, and it stares out of him, and he is falling into the devouring eternity of its pupil. He wants to cry out in horror, but he cannot.

He. Is. *Whole.*

And still he does not wake. Wandering his slim collection of gifted nightmares, passing the grey and lifeless remains of severed dreams he can no longer watch, he waits – but not for long – before they all begin again.

ELIAS

You're doing well, John. I only hope you can continue your growth without my guidance.

[KNOCK ON DOOR]

[ELIAS SIGHS]

[sullenly] Come in.

[DOOR OPENS]

Hello, Inspector. Martin. I'm, uh, sorry to hear about Tim –

MARTIN

Don't.

ELIAS

And Daisy, I suppose –

MARTIN

Don't. You. *Dare.*

ELIAS

I suppose it's *some* consolation Basira made it out. And John. More or less.

[MARTIN INHALES ANGRILY]

POLICE OFFICER

[cutting Martin off] Is this him?

MARTIN

– uh – yes.

POLICE OFFICER

Right. Elias Bouchard, you're under arrest.

ELIAS

[grumpy] On what crime?

POLICE OFFICER

Take your pick. Never had a tape recording of a murder before; something of a novelty.

And that's not the half of it – plenty of stuff in those files could easily get you a nasty end, if you weren't careful.

ELIAS

[hmph] No Melanie?

[EXASPERATED SIGH OVER HIM IN THE BACKGROUND]

I would have thought she would have wanted to gloat.

MARTIN

No. I – I, I –

ELIAS

You didn't tell her. *[hm]* Worried she might create too much of a

scene? I understand. I just hope she… doesn't hold it against you.

MARTIN

That's – that's *not* –

POLICE OFFICER

[interrupting] Don't worry, Mr. Blackwood. *We* will take it from here.

ELIAS

I'm sure you will. However, before we proceed, I have a flash drive in my shirt pocket –

[MORE EXASPERATED NOISES IN BACKGROUND]

– please ensure it gets the Chief Inspector Henderson. It contains various information I think she – and the Metropolitan Police – would be keen not to have released to the public.

POLICE OFFICER

Yes, I was briefed that would probably be the case. Can't let you go, though – not with all the evidence kindly provided by your colleagues.

ELIAS

I quite understand. I would just hate for my case to be too… truncated –

POLICE OFFICER

[interrupting] Not my place to say, Mr. Bouchard. I'm just here to get you behind bars. You and the chief can discuss the rest.

MARTIN

It's better than you deserve.

ELIAS

Perhaps so, but I'm glad you were sensible about it. I was concerned you might have bought into Melanie's… fixation.

POLICE OFFICER

Gave you to us all but wrapped up in a bow.

ELIAS

I must admit I'm impressed, Martin.

[FURTHER EXASPERATED BACKGROUND NOISES AS ELIAS SPEAKS]

I knew you were all planning something, of course, but I didn't believe you *specifically* would have the, uh – capacity for boldness that you displayed. *[hm]* It took me quite by surprise.

MARTIN

You didn't just *see* it in me?

ELIAS

Honestly, I didn't look. For all my power, I will admit I am not immune to making the occasional lazy assumption. I presumed that I knew you thoroughly, but by the time you demonstrated otherwise – well. There was simply too much to keep watching over. I only have two eyes, after all.

POLICE OFFICER

Right, are you all done now?

ELIAS

I believe so. I think we should be fine – provided you make sure the data reaches the Chief Inspector.

POLICE OFFICER

I'm sure she'll be happy to pick you out a cell personally.

ELIAS

So long as it isn't the morgue, I'm sure I'll be perfectly comfortable.

MARTIN

Just be, be careful with him, all right, he can *see* things – put thoughts and – *stuff* into your head –

POLICE OFFICER

Like I said: I've been briefed. And the situation is being monitored –

ELIAS

Quite unnecessary, I assure you.

MARTIN

Just – *please* be careful, he's *really* dangerous.

POLICE OFFICER

By all means, Mr. Bouchard, why don't you have a look in *my* head, and see exactly what will happen to you when you mess with me?

ELIAS

There will be no need for that, Inspector, *[small forced laugh]* I'm sure we'll get along famously.

POLICE OFFICER

Good.

ELIAS

Best of luck, Martin. Let the others know I shall be thinking of them.

POLICE OFFICER

Come on, now.

[SOUND OF OFFICER CUFFING ELIAS]

ELIAS

[ow] Are those *really* necessary?

[SOUND OF ELIAS BEING APPARENTLY PUNCHED IN THE STOMACH]

ELIAS

[gag, wheeze]

POLICE OFFICER

Not really, no.

ELIAS

[strained] I see.

POLICE OFFICER

Let's go.

ELIAS

[wheeze] Goodbye, Martin. *[wheeze]* Be seeing you.

[FOOTSTEPS; DOOR CLOSES.]

[MARTIN SIGHS.]

[HIGH-PITCHED, SQUEALING STATIC.]

PETER

Must be a relief.

MARTIN

– Uh –

PETER

Honestly, I thought there'd be more of a scene –

[MARTIN EXHALES LOUDLY]

– but he always surprises me.

MARTIN

[freaking out] What – what are you doing here, Mr. Lukas?!

PETER

Please – call me Peter.

MARTIN

No – no, I think I'm okay!

PETER

As you like. *[patronizingly]* Look, don't let Elias get to you –

[MARTIN EXHALES LOUDLY]

– you did *very* well! Really! I honestly think you managed to *surprise* him – even if he'd sooner die than admit it.

MARTIN

I'm sorry, I'm – I'm still not sure exactly what this is.

PETER

Oh, right, of course.

[GROWING NON-LUKAS-STATIC-TYPE BACKGROUND VIBRATIONS]

Well: you've successfully managed to remove Elias as the head of the Magnus Institute. So…?

MARTIN

Oh – oh, *god,* what does that *do?!*

PETER

Oh! No, nonono, no – not in any *metaphysical* sense, no. He's still very much the – how did he insist on phrasing it? – ah, yes, the "beating heart" of the Institute. But practically speaking, he can hardly fulfill his more mundane managerial duties from a jail cell.

MARTIN

So, he knew this was going to happen?

PETER

Not *exactly?* He anticipated that *you* would likely find some way to remove him, so he made alternative arrangements.

MARTIN

Which would be you.

PETER

Exactly!

To be honest with you, Martin, I didn't expect to be taking over the place so soon, or in quite such a state of disarray. But I'll do my best to keep the place afloat.

MARTIN

[sigh] …right.

PETER

Oh, what's that *look* for? You won! I am sorry if it doesn't look quite like you hoped, but – here we are!

MARTIN

I suppose so.

So what now?

PETER

Well, if you could send Melanie and Basira up to see me, I'd like to introduce myself. After that, I'll put through a couple of weeks of paid leave for you all – I think giving everyone some space to try and deal with the loss of Tim and Daisy might do everyone some good.

[MARTIN SIGHS]

Oh, and if you want to talk to a counselor, the Institute will of course cover any cost.

MARTIN

Uh – thanks?

PETER

Don't mention it. I know how it can be with a new boss. I'd like to help you ease into it.

MARTIN

Is, is that –

…can I… go?

PETER

Of course!

Oh, and Elias said you'd probably be keeping a close eye on the Archivist's condition, so I'd be keen to hear any developments.

MARTIN

…

…suuuuuure.

PETER

Marvellous. And don't look so down! I know, change *can* be scary, but eventually it happens just the same.

I think we're going to great things, Martin.

Great. Things.

[CLICK]

Season 3 of *The Magnus Archives* has featured:

- Jonathan Sims as **The Archivist**
- Sasha Sienna as **Georgie Barker**
- Fay Roberts as **Alice 'Daisy' Tonner**
- Alexander J. Newall as **Martin Blackwood**
- Frank Voss as **Basira Hussain**
- Mike LeBeau as **Tim Stoker**

- Ben Meredith as **Elias Bouchard**
- Lydia Nicholas as **Melanie King**
- **Sue Sims** as **Gertrude Robinson**
- **Hannah Walker** as **Jude Perry**
- Guy Kelly as **Michael Crew**
- Jessica Law as **Nikola Orsinov**
- **Alice Adzowa** as **Sarah Baldwin**
- Luke Booys as **The Distortion**
- **Imogen Harris** as **Helen Richardson**
- **Steven Violich** as **Kurt Anderson and Hope**
- **Martin Corcoran** as **Breekon**
- **Peng Wei** as **Xiaoling**
- Brock Winstead as **Max Mustermann**
- Francesca Renèe Reid as **Julia Montauk**
- Ian Hayles as **Trevor Herbert**
- Jon Gracey as **Gerard Keay**
- **Richard Davies** as **Police Officer**
- **Paul Sims** as **Jurgen Leitner**

- Alasdair Stuart as **Peter Lukas**
- Lowri Ann Davies as **Lynne Hammond**
- Martyn Pratt as **Robin Lennox**
- James Ross as **Conspiracy Theorist**

and

- Bryn Monroe as **Brian Finlinson**

MAG120.2 – Season 4 Trailer

[INT. HOSPITAL, JOHN'S ROOM]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[A clock ticks steadily in the background.]

[The door opens, and we get a brief few seconds of hallway noise before it is closed again.]

[We hear a few breaths, and a footstep or to as whoever entered makes their way to the bed.]

MARTIN

Hi, John. *(shaky breath)*

(pause)

Uh-hh… How are you? *(short pause)* *(short laugh)* Yeah. Yeah, same here. It's – *(inhale)* It's bad all over, *(sigh)* y'know? *[Hold I'm –]* getting by, I suppose. Um… Basira's keeping things, taking over, and Melanie is – *(sigh)* Well, well,

[The "well" turns into a rueful laugh.]

MARTIN

Melanie is Melanie. *(laugh)* Anyway, yeah, just – thought I'd stop by. Check in and uh, y'know. See how you're, um –

(pause) (sigh) (pause)

We really need you, John. Everything's – It's bad. I-I don't know how much longer we can do this. We – *I* need you. And I-I know that you're not – I know there's no way to –

(soft, shaky breath) But we need you, John. John, please, just – *(wet) Please. (trying not to cry)* If-If there's anything left in you that can still see us, or, or some power that you've still got, or, or, or, something, *anything,* please!

(pause, more put together) Please. *(inhale, definitely about to cry)* I-I can't –

[His phone buzzes three times – it's on vibrate – he gasps softly in surprise. We hear him get up from what, presumably, is a chair, and answer the phone. When he speaks, he's much more business-like, gives no sign that he was seconds away from crying not even a minute before.]

MARTIN (PHONE)

Yeah. Yeah, I know.

(waits for response)

I'm – I'm actually with him now.

[He sniffs as he says this, the way you might try to get rid of a cold.]

MARTIN (PHONE)

You were right.

[He moves about.]

MARTIN (PHONE)

(waits) (shaky breath) I –

(big sigh)

Will they be **safe**?

(waits)

Okay. *(more confident)* Okay. I'll do it.

(response)

Yeah. Sure thing.

[Small sigh from Martin.]

MARTIN

(to John) I'm sorry. Goodbye, John.

[Slight pause.]

[The door opens. We again hear the bustle of the hallway before it closes. The bustle is still audible in the background as the clock ticks on. Then –]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG121 – Far Away

Statement #0181502

[CLICK]

[CLOCK TICKS]

[DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES]

[CLOCK CONTINUES TO TICK]

[SOUND OF SOMEONE SITTING DOWN]

[CLOCK CONTINUES TO TICK]

OLIVER

Um. Hello, John. Do you… *mind* if I call you John? I, I mean, you don't *actually* know me. It's just, well. "Archivist." It's so formal, isn't it? And I do *kind* of know you…? Haven't had much choice, really. Dreams are like that, you know. No matter how lucid you think they are, there's always that part that just drags you along.

Guess I don't need to tell *you* that. At least, not right now.

[sigh] Wish I could tell you *why* I came here. Wish I *knew* why I came here. Suppose there's only so long you can dream about

someone and not at least try to find them. That was it with the old woman, too. That was different, though. Way I figure it, she stuck her nose in just about everywhere it wasn't wanted and stirred up hornets, 'till all the precautions in the world couldn't stop death from finally catching her. *[sigh]* If I had known more back then, I'm not sure I'd have bothered trying to warn her. Still, you live and learn, don't you?

Sorry to go on, I, I don't talk to many people these days. Putting my thoughts outside myself, it gets a bit, er, clumsy. Be easier if you could talk back, right? Ask me questions, and just, have it tumble all out? But no. It's, it's just me. Wish there was a better way, but touching someone's mind, it's not as simple as that, is it? Doesn't always make things clearer, you know? Still, I gave the old woman a statement, so maybe I owe you one as well. That's how it works, right? Give your terror, give your dream? It's not like I don't have them to spare.

Hmm.

Let me tell you about how *I* tried to escape.

OLIVER (STATEMENT)

So. My name is Oliver Banks. In my other statements, I used the name Antonio Blake, but I don't really think either name has much meaning for me anymore. It's been almost ten years since I first started dreaming about the deaths of others. Seeing those awful veins crawling into them, into wounds not yet open, or skulls not

yet split. People who are about to die. Every night I watch as they sneak up and into throats about to choke on blood, or lurch into hearts about to convulse. I've come to terms with it. *[bitter laugh]* I've learned to live with it.

But about two years before I came to your Institute, something happened. Something I didn't want to talk about. Didn't even want to think about. I started to see them when I was awake. It was subtle at first, so quick I could pretend I hadn't seen. Just a second of them webbed over the face of a drunk old man stumbling into his car. A chain smoker exhales, and just for a second I catch one dangling from his mouth, before it slithers back inside. Crossing a bridge and I might see one snaking along the road, over towards the railing.

Looking back now I feel like an idiot, trying to pretend I was imagining it – that I was just tired, or whatever bull I told myself. It started to happen more often, and I began to avoid the places that I visited in my dreams. I sort of knew, you see, that not all of the cords would have faded when I woke up.

I still remember the first time I tried to touch one. In my dreams the night before, I had found my way back to my own street. I don't know why I did it; I knew it was a stupid thing to do, walking past my own home in a dream. But I just… maybe I wanted it this way. I mean, when I stepped out the building that morning, I didn't turn towards the bus stop like I always do. I turned right instead, walked over to the little alleyway where I knew, sometime in the next week, a young woman was going to have a fatal aneurysm. And

there they were on the concrete, like a starburst of fleshy roots, spreading and reaching out from the spot where her head was going to hit the ground. They moved just like in the dreams, throbbing and pulsing.

I had to take a moment, just to be sure, just to be completely sure, that I was awake. I felt like I was staring at it for hours, but I don't think it was much more than a few minutes. They didn't fade, didn't vanish, and there was no way for me to pretend that they weren't there. So, I reached out my hand and tried to touch them.

You know what's weird, right? In all my years of being a – …what am I? Death prophet? Whatever. – I had never actually touched a corpse. Hardly ever seen one in real life. I could have told you in a moment how many people in this hospital were going to die. How many would do it tonight, even how it was going to happen. But I had never once actually come up close to a dead body. I always assumed they were cold. Not quite damp, but sort of clammy.

Still… this was like ice. No – colder than ice. The sort of cold that just cuts right through you. It was soft and rubbery, squirming when I pressed on it, and recoiling from the tip of my finger. I've never felt anything as cold as those veins. It was so… *patient.* It made me think of those winter mornings, when I was a kid, with no snow, just frost and frozen mist over everything. Keeping the world in place, curling you up into yourself, and quietly waiting for you to lose your footing, to slip up and fall. Snap!

It made me think of dead worlds floating out into space. Places that

didn't know and didn't care that life even existed. It made me think of mortality, like the seconds that were dragging me to the grave were being pulled out of me.

And the worst part was that, somewhere in me I, I liked it. Underneath all that awful fear, it felt like… home.

After that happened, they wouldn't leave me alone. I could see them spreading, see them growing. Even when I went to your Institute, tried to warn her, I could see them crawling through the corridors, towards the Archives. They never got quite as big as they were in my dreams, but it wasn't long before I was seeing them all the time. I tried to avoid them – of course I did – but sometimes I didn't notice, and I would brush against them. Never mattered what I was wearing, cold would just cut through it like a razor.

I wanted to escape. I *needed* to. I became obsessed with trying to find somewhere with fewer and fewer people. Moving out of the city helped, but, well. People still die in the countryside. I saw them coiling around a fencepost by the road, climbing up the wall and into the top window of a beautiful little cottage. I'll never forget seeing a field of cows the week before they were sent to the abattoir.

I'd spend hours researching, desperately looking at remote locations, places far away from civilization, and all its dying people. Lonely summits, deep jungles, deserts where even animals couldn't live. I was so hungry for the peace that I thought these places could give me.

Then I read about Point Nemo. If you look it up online, they call it the “oceanic point of inaccessibility.” It’s a spot in the middle of the South Pacific Ocean. Specifically, it is the farthest it’s possible to be from any landmass. 1400 miles from anyone or anything. No ships ever need to travel through it, and ocean currents keep away the nutrients that would have normally supported sea life. It is the emptiest, most lifeless place on earth.

Sometimes the closest humans are in the satellites orbiting up above it – before they fall out of the sky, of course. It turns out, Point Nemo is an ideal site for spacecraft to crash-land. There must be hundreds of wrecks down there, taken from the edge of one lifeless abyss and sent screaming down into another.

I loved it. The idea of it, of being so far from anything. Somewhere that there was so little life that death could never find me. Empty clear water, free of those creeping tendrils.

Of course, I had no way to get there. I’m not a rich man, and even if I was, it’s not like I have any idea how to organize a sea voyage. So, for years, it was just my little fantasy. My escape. Whenever it all got too much for me, and I woke up to those veins reaching along the wall, towards my neighbor’s apartment, I would go online, and look at the photos people claimed were taken at Point Nemo. I would revel in the thought that those claims were probably lies, as there was a very good chance that no human being had ever reached the exact coordinates that promised me my escape.

But I couldn’t dream of it. I tried, of course. I spent every moment

of lucidity I had trying to guide myself far, far away from land; away from those horrid tubes that sat there throbbing doom out into the world. But each time I started to get away from them – whenever I felt I, I might have reached a point where I couldn't see any more of them – I would start to feel this tugging on my leg. Like something was wrapped around it and starting to gently squeeze. Something that pulsed very softly.

I never quite had the courage to actually look at it. I'd always just turn around and start moving back towards a city. And it would let me go. I never even got over the channel in my dreams, let alone all the way to the South Pacific.

So, you can maybe imagine how I felt when I found an article, tucked in the margins of a regional paper, talking about an upcoming expedition to sail a research vessel down to Point Nemo. The piece didn't go into much detail about what they were trying to do – something about measuring the amount of plastic and chemicals in the water, seeing how much impact humans had had on the environment at its most extreme point… I mean, I don't know.

I'm not a scientist. And I'm not a sailor, either. There was no legitimate way I was ever going to make it onto that ship, but none of that mattered. I had to do it. I hadn't been sleeping much, I suppose, and I had it lodged into my mind that if I could just get there, to Point Nemo, if I could just… if I could be far enough away from mortality and people and land, then I could rest. I could finally have a dreamless sleep.

So, I did some digging, found the identity of a few crew members, and started to track them down. I told myself that I didn't know what I was looking for, but I did. Of course I did. And I finally saw them, following along behind Dr. Thomas Pritchard.

He was a younger guy, some sort of chemist, and he had a habit of driving his motorcycle a bit too recklessly. When I saw him that first time, the veins were tumbling out from the open visor of his bike helmet and coiling themselves around his throat so tightly that it almost seemed like his head wasn't attached the rest of him. Of course, after he went flying over the barrier at 95 miles an hour… well, it's neither here nor there. It was three in the morning, and the motorway was silent, except for me and the mangled remains of Dr. Thomas Pritchard.

I knew exactly what I had to do. He didn't look anything like me, not really, but that didn't matter. All that mattered was my desperation to finally have a good night's sleep. I looked at his body, but all I could think of was the gentle rocking of lifeless waves. So I took his ID and his keys. Then I touched my very first corpse as I loaded what was left of him and his motorcycle into my van, and buried them in a well-hidden spot near Epping Forest.

It's strange, after all that. I don't actually remember how I felt. Heavy, I think.

But I had other concerns. It was a daft plan. It shouldn't have worked. Someone should have driven past while I was moving him. Someone should have seen me. But they didn't. With his keys, I let

myself into Dr. Pritchard's flat and gathered as much information on the expedition as I could. It wasn't a lot – not that I could really understand, and I just had to hope it was enough to pass myself off. Even if it was only long enough to get one good night's sleep.

As it turned out, I needn't have bothered. Far as I could tell, nobody on board had actually met Dr. Pritchard in person. A couple of people told me they had "the greatest respect for my work," and a few did say how different I had sounded on the phone. But once I walked up and said who I was, nobody even bothered to check my ID.

I don't remember the name of the ship. I mean, boarding it was such a blur I didn't really notice much, and later on I was far too nervous to ask. It was large, though with every spare inch covered in scientific equipment of some sort or other. I was relieved to find out I was the only chemist on board, so nobody was going to see me misusing anything, and figure out what was going on. At least, not until it was too late to act upon it.

There were a couple of marine biologists on board, a meteorologist, an engineer, someone who called herself a "macro-ecologist" – though at times, she looked almost as out of her depth as I did. Beyond that, there were half a dozen crew running the ship.

They were led by Captain MacAvey, a tall, ugly woman with a sharp tongue, though it was never clear to me whether she was the one in charge of the expedition, or if it was Clara, the senior-most marine biologist. It didn't really matter, of course. As far as I was

concerned, Dr. Pritchard was a private, standoffish person who liked to spend his time alone in his makeshift lab, or asleep in his bunk.

And I did *sleep*. The further we got from land, the deeper, more peaceful it became. I still dreamed, of course, but I would just wander the empty deck of the ship, drinking in the quiet atmosphere of the place.

I did have to force myself not to look over the railing in my dreams. Once or twice, while staring at the peaceful dream water, I almost felt like I could see something moving, deep, deep below the surface, impossibly huge and dark. I quickly learned the lesson to remain fully focused upon the ship when I dreamed.

Of course, the more rest I got, the more lucid I became. I was thinking more clearly than I had in months, and the absolute foolishness of what I'd done to get there was starting to sink in. There was exactly no way that they wouldn't figure out that I did not have a doctorate in chemistry or, er, suchlike, and when that happened, I had no idea what I was going to do. I spent days trying to think of some sort of plan, but in the end, the best I could come up with was just to wait for it, and throw myself upon their mercy and hope that they took enough pity on me not to immediately pitch me overboard into the waters of the South Pacific.

But, that was the future. Before then, I had months of peaceful sleep ahead of me. Then, I had weeks. Then days. The ship kept going, powering on towards a destination I wasn't completely sure I still

wanted. I started to wander the decks in my waking hours as well as my sleeping, staring at the horizon. It never ended, but kept getting closer, all the same.

Time is like that, isn't it? Just keeps going, no matter what happens, it just carries on, and it strips everything away from you in the end, the good and the bad alike, until there is nothing left of either.

"This too shall pass." "All good things must come to an end." *"Memento mori."*

As soon as I woke up, I knew we had finally reached Point Nemo. Everything felt *different* – like the calm I had been getting accustomed to had been torn away completely, and where it had been was just this horrible, ice-cold terror.

I felt something on my chest, coiling up my back and pulsing gently around my throat. I didn't need to look down to know what it was. In a second, I was out of my bunk and charging onto the deck, just to see veins, dark and cold and bigger by far than any I'd ever seen, rise up from the water below us. They towered over the ship for just a second, before starting to wrap themselves around it. For a moment, the embrace looked almost… affectionate.

The rest of the crew didn't seem to notice, walking through the immense, grasping tendrils like they weren't there at all, even as the small and branching cords stretched off and wrapped around each one of them in turn. And the soft icy flesh that wrapped around me kept gripping me tighter, and tighter, until I could barely move.

I wanted to scream, but the others were already staring at me as if I was screaming obscenities. Perhaps I was.

At that moment, a sudden calm came over me. I understood it all. I could follow the line of the huge veins that encased the ship down into the water, leading off to a point to almost a mile to the southeast.

There. That was it. That was our fate; where we would always be. Because I was going to take us there.

Running was pointless. To try to escape from my task would only serve to fulfill another. I finally understood what I needed to do. I couldn't steer a ship myself, of course, but there were plenty of other people on board who could, as long as I could persuade them. Which I did, to a point. I don't know where I got the gun, but once captain MacAvey was dead, the others were very keen to sail wherever I wanted.

The doom held me tight and pulled us all slowly, inevitably towards our grave. And when we got there, and cut the engines, and began to wait, I could feel all of their eyes look to me, panicked, hoping for some sort of explanation.

I almost tried to give them one. But I barely got the first word out before the falling satellite debris hit the ship at 200 miles an hour, killing us instantly.

OLIVER

Right. That's, uh, it, I suppose. Maybe you heard me. Maybe you'll dream. Then again, maybe I just wasted my breath – but, I don't think so.

Honestly, I'm still not exactly sure why I'm here. But you know better than anyone how the spiders can get into your head. Easier to just do what she asks.

The thing is, John, right now you have a choice. You've put it off a long time, but it's trapping you here. You're not quite human enough to die, but still too human to survive. You're balanced on an edge where the End can't touch you, but you can't escape him.

I made a choice. We all made choices. Now you have to –

[DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES]

GEORGIE

Can I help you?

OLIVER

Oh, I, I'm a friend. Of John's.

GEORGIE

Are you, now.

OLIVER

Uh, y-yes.

GEORGIE

Right. Just haven't seen you visiting before.

OLIVER

Umm, I've… been out of town!

GEORGIE

Right. The nurse didn't say anyone else was here.

OLIVER

Oh! Oh, oh, well. Sorry if I surprised you.

GEORGIE

It's fine.

OLIVER

…I'm Antonio!

GEORGIE

[sarcastic] Sure.

OLIVER

Do you um, mind giving us a minute?

GEORGIE

No, I think you're done here.

OLIVER

Oh. Uh… right…

[SOUND OF STANDING UP]

…have I upset you, miss –

GEORGIE

No, you just remind me of someone.

OLIVER

Ahhh, I'm sorry! Were they –

GEORGIE

Evil. Yes.

OLIVER

[resigned] Uh, okay, then. Well, I just, well, I guess I should just go.

GEORGIE

I guess you should!

OLIVER

…Make your choice, John.

[DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES]

GEORGIE

[sigh] Sorry about that, but you really don't need friends like tha…

….

Did…?

[PAUSE]

[DOOR OPENS AND GEORGIE RUNS OUT INTO THE CORRIDOR]

Hey! Hey, get back here, I need to talk to you!

[CLOCKS CONTINUES TO TICK]

[ARCHIVIST SHIFTS IN BED AND BEGINS TO BREATHE]

[CLICK]

MAG122 – Zombie

Statement #0150102

[INT. HOSPITAL, JOHN'S ROOM]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The clock of the hospital room ticks on steadily in the background.]

BASIRA

Well?

GEORGIE

It was just there!

BASIRA

Could he have come back? Moved it?

GEORGIE

I guess?

BASIRA

And you're sure you didn't recognize him.

GEORGIE

No, no – he was, um – I'd never seen him before.

BASIRA

But?…

GEORGIE

He, uh, he felt like death.

BASIRA

What, capital 'D' Death?

GEORGIE

Yeah. Y'know, one of your… dark gods –

BASIRA

(frustrated) They're not –

[She cuts herself off.]

BASIRA

Look, I'm trying to help. You came to me.

GEORGIE

I came to Melanie.

BASIRA

Well, sorry. Right now, I'm it.

[Silence, but for the clock.]

BASIRA

So John told you, then.

GEORGIE

Some of it. Not – everything.

BASIRA

Right. So how exactly is it that you're able to identify an avatar of the End on sight?

GEORGIE

Honestly Basira, it's not your business. *(pause)* Sorry.

[Basira sniffs.]

BASIRA

Alright. And you don't know why this guy would have left a tape recorder?

GEORGIE

You're the detective.

BASIRA

And you're sure it was him who left it?

GEORGIE

I mean – the nurses said there were no other visitors, so *(breath)* unless it appeared by magic?

[Pause.]

GEORGIE

(disbelief) What, seriously?

BASIRA

I don't know. The whole tape thing is… I don't know.

GEORGIE

Right, well… I showed you like you asked, so –

BASIRA

Shh.

[Rustling as she moves down, getting closer to the tape recorder.]

BASIRA

Down here.

[More rustling.]

GEORGIE

I *told* you –

BASIRA

This is the one?

[We hear the Archivist breathing hoarsely, quietly in the background.]

GEORGIE

Sure.

BASIRA

You don't *sound* very sure.

GEORGIE

I mean – I don't know. It might be a different model maybe? I thought it was *plastic* – but yeah.

[More Archivist breathing/sighing as she's speaking; by the

time she's done the room is silent but for the clock again.]

GEORGIE

So – what does it mean?

ARCHIVIST

(hoarse, tired, drained) That's a very good question.

GEORGIE

(overlapping) John!

BASIRA

(overlapping) Jesus.

ARCHIVIST

(bit of a dry laugh) Sorry. *(breath)* Didn't mean to scare you.

GEORGIE

(overlapping) I'll get a nurse.

BASIRA

Wait.

GEORGIE

Basira!

BASIRA

John, is it still… you?

ARCHIVIST

Uhh. Y-yes. Y-yes, I-I think so; I, I don't know how you'd prove it, though.

BASIRA

Hm.

GEORGIE

E*nough* – just – stay still; I'll get a nurse.

ARCHIVIST

I, no, I, uh, *(he starts to sit himself up)* I'm alright, it's –

GEORGIE

(overlapping) Stop it!

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) – I'm *okay*.

GEORGIE

John, you are *not* okay; you have been in a coma.

[Rustling.]

ARCHIVIST

Wait – wait – how long?

BASIRA

Six months, give or take.

ARCHIVIST

Six… Uh, the others. T-Tim. Is he…?

[Silence.]

ARCHIVIST

Oh.

[He lets out a breath.]

BASIRA

Daisy too.

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry.

BASIRA

Yeah.

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

Alright – g–

[Sounds of exertion- trying to sit up further?]

GEORGIE

John.

ARCHIVIST

It's alright.

GEORGIE

Stay still. Please.

[The Archivist sighs, then takes a shaky breath.]

GEORGIE

How are you feeling?

ARCHIVIST

Honestly, I – I, I think I'm alright.

[Georgie sighs in exasperation.]

ARCHIVIST

I mean that's – *good*, right?

[Georgie sighs again.]

ARCHIVIST

I –

GEORGIE

After a six month coma? No – it's not. This isn't how it's supposed to go, John.

ARCHIVIST

I – what? Y-y-you'd prefer I was – brain-damaged? *Dead?*

BASIRA

John.

ARCHIVIST

(shaky sigh) W,W,What?

[Pause, Basira sighs.]

BASIRA

Georgie, could you give us a minute? There's some things we should probably discuss.

GEORGIE

(overlapping) Fine.

ARCHIVIST

D– Georgie, I –

GEORGIE

John. If this really is a second chance, *please* try to take it. But I don't think that it is.

ARCHIVIST

(breath) Georgie, I *don't* underst–

GEORGIE

Take care of yourself.

[The Archivist lets out another shaky breath. Georgie leaves, closing the door behind her.]

ARCHIVIST

Wh– I – *(sigh) (quicker)* What about you? *Disappointed* to see me alive? Basira?

BASIRA

We can deal with it later.

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

(small) Yeah.

(breath) Yeah, okay.

[More heavy breathing.]

BASIRA

Do you want me to grab you some water, or…?

ARCHIVIST

No – ah, the, the, uh, the statement. In your, in your bag.

BASIRA

Oh. Yeah, I uh, *(unzips her bag)* I just grabbed one on the way out; I thought maybe you'd need it for –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping, quick) You, you were right – I, I think it would do me some good. Do you have a tape re– Oh.

[He sighs.]

BASIRA

How did you know I brought one? *(pause)* Right.

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

Thank you, Basira.

BASIRA

Hm.

[She leaves, and we catch a whiff of hallway bustle as the door shuts behind her. John lets out another deep sigh.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of uh, *(something catches in his throat, he swallows)* Uh, Lorell St. John regarding, uh… *(huh) (disbelief)* …zombies. Original statement given 1st February, 2015. Recording by *(labored breath)* Jonathan Sims. The Archivist.

Statement begins.

[As he reads the statement, his voice slowly, incrementally starts to improve.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

People always used to tell me I was… solipsistic. They said that I – never really *engaged* with other people, never acted like they really existed, or mattered, at least not in the same way that I did. I suppose in, in many ways they were right. It's hard to explain without sounding stupid.

Obviously other people are real – *(stammering)* O-obviously, the, the way a building is real, or my watch is real. They exist. If people weren't real, I'm sure I'd find them much less of a chore.

So no, I don't not believe in other people. I just find it very difficult to *feel* for others, I, I can't understand them, and they've always seemed…oh there's no tactful way to say it – they've always seemed… pointless. I know what my pain feels like, and I know what my joy feels like, but when I see those same things on the faces of my friends, or my enemies, I feel… Well that's it, isn't it? I don't really feel anything. Their emotions and suffering feel as distant to me as a character on a movie screen. More distant, really.

I-In many ways I find those crude characters that wander through ridiculous plot after ridiculous plot more relatable than the people watching next to me. That said, Danielle did tell me once that films tended to depict characters like that so it's easier to project yourself onto them. So maybe it isn't quite as surprising as all that. I like animals, too. They don't pretend to be important. So, assuming you can understand anything, I would hope that you could understand why the philosophical concept of zombies might worm its way into

my mind.

Danielle studies philosophy. W-Well, she *studied* philosophy. And she was one of those people who loved to talk to other people about it, try to explain it as a way of internalizing the information, so come exam season, her favorite revision method was to try and explain a year's worth of dusty old white men thinking about existence to me.

She said it really helped, and, well – sometimes I didn't have anything better to do. It never stuck, of course; it's all kind of rubbish, really – people trying to *think* the universe into making sense, coming up with all sorts of *nonsense* and trying to claim that 'if you can imagine it it must be true.' I'm, I'm grossly oversimplifying, of course, but I don't care. I don't think Danielle did very well in her exams.

I remember the night she told me about zombies. It was dark outside and must have been late. It was high summer, and the days were long. And sweltering. Our building really kept the heat, and had very few opening windows, so even in the evening that humid warmth seemed to stick around. One of our housemates, Liam, was sat at the other end of the living room, playing some obnoxious video game. He had the lights at that end of the room turned off, and the screen lit up his blank, gormless face as he stared at some space monster or other that he had to kill.

Danielle explained that a philosophical zombie is someone who outwardly displays all the signs of life and consciousness: they talk;

they laugh; they scream; they even appear to think. But they have no inner life at all, no actual subjective experience. It's all a, a rule, a, a conjuring trick. If you cut them, they'd bleed, they might even cry out, but they wouldn't actually feel any pain, because they can't actually *feel* anything. It's all just an act.

(laughing) I said to Danielle, "Like Liam," a-and she laughed, at what she assumed was a funny joke, and tried to explain it again, told me they weren't *real*, that it was all a, a thought experiment, and the fact that you could imagine them was supposed to counter some other philosopher, who sounded equally meaningless.

But, like I said, I don't think she got a very good grade, and looking at Liam, blankly staring into that glowing square on the wall, I, I knew she was wrong. They were real. His eyes were so dark, and – dull. Empty windows to a soul that – he didn't really have.

I started to do some… experiments on him. N-not many, just a few little ones here and there to… see. I suppose you might've called them cruel, if Liam was capable of suffering; he certainly pretended to cry out in pain when I *accidentally* cut his hand while chopping onions, and he did a good impression of grief when his fish died. But his eyes were always the same: cold. And empty.

I didn't *do* anything about it, obviously; what was the point? There was no real harm in him going out into the world *pretending* to live his life; it was no skin off my nose, certainly.

It wasn't just him, though. There were… so many more of them out

there. At one point I did legitimately entertain the notion that they might *all* be zombies. Every one. That it was just me. That I was the only real person that existed. But, no, that wasn't right; it was just certain people; I watched their reactions, the emotions they didn't quite get right, and I *knew* they were a facade.

It became like a game to me. Watching out for those… soulless husks. Whether on the bus, the street, or even meeting a client for work, I would look into their eyes for just a second, and see the emptiness inside. I tried to make it a game, at least. The truth was, they scared me very deeply. What were they? How did it happen; were they – born hollow, or did something scoop them out, leave them like that?

And the question that kept me up, staring into the darkness late at night – why did it seem like I was the only one able to see them? I saw so many people, *real* people, chatting with these *zombies*, talking to them as if they were able to understand what was being said to them, rather than simply pretending. How was it that they couldn't see the quiet void that lurked behind each of their smiles. And there seemed to be more and more of them every day. Sometimes I found myself utterly alone. Facing down a room full of nothing eyes, willing myself to take action.

I never did, though. Not even when one of them started following me. I first saw him in the street; it wasn't difficult to guess what he was; half the people around him were just as hollow and soulless. But there was something else, to him. He was tall. But not so tall as to stick out. Thin, but not unhealthily so. He wore a blue t-shirt

despite the falling temperature, and his short, dark hair and pale skin surrounded a smile so fake, it practically glowed.

He stared at me as I walked past, not making a move to follow or stop me; nor did his eyes seem to actually… move. It was like one of those paintings that watch you; it just seemed that whatever place I looked at him from, he just happened to be focused on me. In as much as there was any focus in them at all. Vacant.

The next day he was there again, this time in the hallway outside my office, standing in the center, so that I had to hug the wall to avoid touching his… motionless form. He was identical. Except that his t-shirt was now a dull orange.

I asked my colleague Norma what she thought of him, why he was there, and if she noticed anything strange about him. She looked out into the corridor, then, back at me and shook her head. She told me he seemed normal enough. But her eyes were like blank pits, and I knew she was lying about all of it.

Had he done this? Had he taken Norma's..s-self, h-her soul, or… or had she *always been a zombie?* Cramped, into a little open-plan desk, patiently listening to client complaints, and I just hadn't *noticed*? I looked around my office, a low dread starting to build as he waited outside. A numbing cavity *wrapped in skin.*

I tried to talk to him, when he stood next to me on the bus. I played as casual as I could, trying not to seem afraid when I asked him how his day was going.

“Just fine, thank you for asking,” came the flat, uninterested response.

Then I, I asked him his name. “Just fine, thank you for asking,” he said.

I have never wanted anything as much as I wanted in that moment to *cut* him, and see if he pretended to scream in pain.

By the time he appeared outside my house, this time wearing a rotten green t-shirt, I could *feel* a numbness in myself even as I looked at him. Was I finally becoming like them? My internal world melting away into nothing but a *pantomime?* I remember I ran at him, all my rage burning inside my chest as though desperate to remind myself that I could still feel something.

I think I might have been screaming, but the memory is fuzzy. I remember I punched him in the face, though. When my fist connected, it was like punching a canvas. Taught, dry, and – yielding, ever so slightly, until all at once it broke with a tearing pop and all that resistance was gone, my fist falling into the empty space behind it.

Inside his head, I-I pulled my hand back in sudden disgust, and he looked at me, through the torn and bloodless hole in his head. I could see one blank eye hanging down off his face, still following me, as his split mouth moved to try and form the words that I could hear clear as day: *“Just fine, thank you for asking.”*

They’re all like that now. *You’re* all like that, I suppose. I have no

reason to believe anyone will – *(sharp breath)* – read this who would be any different, no reason to believe – *(same breath)* – you'll be *able* to read this, that you won't simply stare blankly at this page before – performing your response, your artificial opinion. There is every chance that I am – the only one left. And the whole world has fallen to a – soulless horde, devoid of life and feeling. Even so, thank you for… pretending to care.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

(sigh) Well that – *(breath)* – certainly helped, I think. No notes or – followup in the statement, and… *(dry laugh)* obviously no research done by myself or, uh… my team. I think we can safely say that Ms. Saint-John is not the only person left in the world, though, whatever *(inhale)* she might be doing now. And whatever might be with her.

They can be hard, though, other, other people. Feelings. I-I'm – I'm trying to focus, trying to make sure I'm the same me as before, but… how can anyone really remember that? How do you know you're the same person that went to sleep?

[He sighs.]

[Then there's a faint knock-knock-knock on the door.]

ARCHIVIST

(quiet) Oh. *(calling)* Ah – Uhh, yes – I'm done.

[The door opens, we catch a glimpse of the hallway bustle. The Archivist takes a shaky breath.]

ARCHIVIST

Georgie, is she, um –

[He sighs.]

BASIRA

She's gone. Didn't see where.

ARCHIVIST

No, I, I wouldn't have, uh.

[He sighs again.]

ARCHIVIST

Probably for the best.

BASIRA

Yeah.

[Pause.]

BASIRA

Better?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Yes, thank you.

BASIRA

Right. Then I've got questions.

ARCHIVIST

So do I.

BASIRA

Me first. What are you?

ARCHIVIST

I – *(sigh) (shaky inhale)* Honestly? I don't know. I don't *feel*… inhuman, or… I want to say I'm the same. But I don't – really know if that's true. I *know* I'm different. I feel… more real, somehow.

[Basira hms, unimpressed.]

BASIRA

So what does that *actually* mean?

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

Probably nothing good.

[Pause. He takes another, long shaky inhale.]

ARCHIVIST

My turn. What happened to me?

BASIRA

How much do you remember?

ARCHIVIST

I don't… Music. Everything was wrong. Gertrude was there, and then… dancing, I think. Then, pain. And I was somewhere else. Dreaming.

BASIRA

Dreaming.

ARCHIVIST

Yes. *(pause)* …You're… sure, a-about Tim.

BASIRA

Yeah, they um… They found his remains a few days later.

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

And – Daisy?

BASIRA

They still haven't found her body. Probably never will. I thought for a while she might, um… *(she sniffs)* But, it's been months. She's gone.

ARCHIVIST

Just you and me. And – Melanie and M-Martin, I, I guess. *(breath)* Honestly, I'm surprised Martin isn't –

[Basira takes a deep breath.]

ARCHIVIST

What? *(realizing)* Oh god – the, the plan, it's – Martin i-is – is he okay, w-what – *(he takes a breath to compose himself) What did Elias do?*

BASIRA

No, nothing. Elias isn't the problem.

ARCHIVIST

So – what?

BASIRA

Elias is locked up.

ARCHIVIST

Wait, Martin's plan worked?

BASIRA

Yeah. A bunch of sectioned officers took him in. He made some sort of deal, I think, but he's not getting out anytime soon.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. *(pause)* Wow, uh – o-okay, so – what's the problem?

BASIRA

He appointed an interim director. Guy named Peter Lukas.

ARCHIVIST

Oh.

BASIRA

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

I've read about him.

BASIRA

Yeah, I've hunted down some of those old statements, and – *(small*

sigh) Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

What did he do to Martin?

BASIRA

I… don't know. We don't see him around the Archives much these days. Best I can figure? He's working on something with Lukas.

ARCHIVIST

No, that – *(breath)* No, that – that – There must be something else.

BASIRA

Maybe. I don't know.

ARCHIVIST

And Melanie?

BASIRA

A lot's happened, while you've been gone.

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

Right. *(sigh)* Well I guess we should probably let one of the nurses know I'm awake. *(sigh)* I'm sure they've got all sorts of – tests to do,

make sure I'm not a – zombie, or… *(hah)* I don't suppose you brought in any – clothes?

BASIRA

No, I just, you know, grabbed that statement on my way out.

ARCHIVIST

Right, well, uh – I kept some in the – uh – Archives, uh, in my office.

BASIRA

Yeah, those got um – we had to throw those out.

ARCHIVIST

What?

BASIRA

Like I said, a lot's happened.

ARCHIVIST

S-since I've been – *(inhale)* Fine.

[He lets out a deep exhale.]

BASIRA

I'll get you some new ones. Better ones.

[Pause.]

BASIRA

Anything else?

ARCHIVIST

(swallows) Water, please.

BASIRA

Sure thing.

[She opens the door and leaves.]

ARCHIVIST

Oh, or, uh, a cup of t–

[The door falls shut.]

[Long pause. The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

(almost a whisper) Okay. *(sigh)*

End recording, I suppose.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG123 – Web Development

Statement #0150108

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

(under his breath) Where did the – *(sighs)*

[Some shuffling as he looks through papers/whatever's on his desk.]

(salt) Coma, great! Let's rearrange his office. Sleeping people don't need – pens.

[He steps in something with a *squelch!*]

Euagh! What –

[Something in the distance is knocking about. The Archivist sighs again, defeated, and gets up to see what the sound is. The angry knocking sound gets closer and louder as the Archivist

moves towards the door.]

[The Archivist opens the door and steps out into]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, HALLWAY]

ARCHIVIST

Melanie! It's very good to, uh – *(surprised concern)* Melanie? Are you al– WOAH!

[Something crashes. Presumably it was thrown at John.]

MELANIE

(extremely angry) **Get *away*** from me.

ARCHIVIST

Now, Melanie – i-it's me.

MELANIE

No, no.

ARCHIVIST

No, I, I, I, I – I'm back.

MELANIE

(overlapping) No. *(after Archivist)* Oh! Oh, yeah, back to your *happy*

little family?

ARCHIVIST

What; no! I j– I didn't mean to –

MELANIE

How did you make it out then, hm?

ARCHIVIST

What?

MELANIE

Tim is dead. *Daisy* is dead, and you – what, you're just *fine?*

ARCHIVIST

What – no! I've been in hospital for six months!

MELANIE

Something has been in hospital. Something that's got your *face*, like – I *warned* Basira; I said not to let you back in here, but she just *(increasingly angry; starts slamming [the wall])* doesn't! listen!

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Melanie, Melanie, it's – it's *me*.

MELANIE

Oh! Okay, so it's what, hi John, how are you, get anyone killed lately?

ARCHIVIST

(dumbstruck) I – I –

MELANIE

Wipe that look off of your face. Like you're not the reason *all* of this is happening! *(she takes a breath)* Like you're *any better* than *[unintelligible]* –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) (stammering)

MELANIE

– than *him!*

ARCHIVIST

– B,B,B,Basira said Elias was gone!

MELANIE

Oh, gone, right, yes, yes, he is *(she takes a breath and sighs)* he's *gone*. Like that makes any difference.

ARCHIVIST

I don't understand.

MELANIE

No! You don't, do you? *He's* still alive. You are still alive. So *this place* is still –

[She starts to take big, heaving breaths, almost to the point of tears.]

ARCHIVIST

Melanie, Melanie, this isn't you –

MELANIE

Get **back! off!**

[She pushes the Archivist and he grunts.]

MELANIE

You don't know me. And I don't know you, so stay the *hell* away from me or I *swear* I will –

ARCHIVIST

(as one would to a riled up grizzly bear) Okay.

[Melanie takes a deep, guttural breath.]

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

[He opens and steps back through the door to INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE]

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

[He takes a long, shaky breath.]

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST

She nearly attacked me, Basira. I know me and Melanie haven't always seen eye to eye before, but – *(sigh) Christ!*

BASIRA

Yeah, I did warn you. She's not uh… She's not been having a good time.

ARCHIVIST

(oh, really?) Mm. Yes, I did get that impression. *(sigh)* Elias is *gone.* I thought – I mean, wasn't that supposed to be – *it. (breath)* But she is *still –*

BASIRA

It's not that simple.

ARCHIVIST

She needs *help*, Basira. God, it didn't even get like that with – *(slower, neutral)* Even Tim never threatened me. Not like that.

BASIRA

Alright, just back off. You haven't been here.

ARCHIVIST

O-okay. You're right. I haven't. So *explain* it to me.

[Basira sighs.]

BASIRA

Alright. Best I can understand it, Beholding, or the Eye, or… whatever you wanna call it, we're one of the only powers that

hasn't taken a shot at a ritual. Yet. And everything out there knows it.

ARCHIVIST

No – I mean, we can't be the *only* ones, surely.

BASIRA

(sigh) I don't know. Probably not. But we made a big noise with the Unknowing and… other stuff and now they've taken notice. We're safe in here, usually. But we don't go out much anymore.

ARCHIVIST

Usually.

BASIRA

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

You were attacked. When?

BASIRA

About two months ago. It was, uh, it was the Flesh.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, god.

BASIRA

Yeah, it was bad. We took them all out. Melanie did most of them. She was… she got a knife from somewhere and –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Basira I-I don't know if that's a good sign?

BASIRA

She saved my life, John. She saved all of us. I won't forget that.

ARCHIVIST

(sighs) Fine. Fine.

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

Haven't seen Martin about.

BASIRA

Yeah, he comes and goes. He's busy.

Well, he seems it.

ARCHIVIST

Working for Peter Lukas.

BASIRA

Don't be too hard on him, John. Your, uh, *situation*. It hit him. Hard.

ARCHIVIST

(sighs) Yes. Well, I'm sure there are better ways to deal with it than getting – *cozy* with Elias's successor. Who I've yet to meet, by the way.

[Basira laughs, mirthless.]

BASIRA

Yeah, join the club.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, you haven't? –

BASIRA

Nope. Never seen him. Far as I can tell, Martin's the only one who has.

ARCHIVIST

R-right. A-and you're sure he's…real?

BASIRA

We get emails from him. Memos.

[The Archivist laughs in disbelief.]

BASIRA

He's been restructuring. Separating out the departments a bit. Not a surprise, I guess, with his pedigree.

ARCHIVIST

But i-if you've never *seen* him, I mean…

BASIRA

(sighs) Rumor is a couple of researchers up on the third floor decided to ignore some of his new directives, and… *whoosh*.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, what's *whoosh*?

BASIRA

Whoosh. Gone.

ARCHIVIST

Oh.

[He laughs, but it, too, is humorless.]

The more things change… So, we're under siege, Melanie is aggressively unstable, Martin is working very closely with – The Lonely, who is predictably enough *isolating* him, and, oh, yes, uh, Tim and Daisy are still dead. *(laughing)* Which is at least easy to

keep track of.

BASIRA

That isn't funny, John.

ARCHIVIST

I *know* it's not – *(pause)* Sorry. It's just – it's a lot.

[He sighs, quietly.]

And we've got an audience. Perfect. I thought you said you decided to throw them all out.

BASIRA

Yep. And I did. And here's another one.

ARCHIVIST

Maybe it's hungry.

BASIRA

Seriously.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, I did have a statement I was planning to record.

BASIRA

Great. Perfect. You can get on with that, and I'll just leave, then.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Ah, what do I do if Melanie comes back?

BASIRA

I don't know. Play dead.

[She opens the door and starts to leave.]

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[The door shuts behind her.]

[Some papers shuffle as he gets the statement ready.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Angie Santos, regarding a website developed by one Gregory Cox. Original statement given 1st August, 2015. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Okay, for this to make any… real kind of sense, you sort of need to

know Greg. Or, at least, understand how he works. Don't… misunderstand me, please, I, I'm very fond of the man, but I have never in my life encountered anyone quite so… passive. So willing to go along with whatever situation he finds himself in. No matter how awkward or uncomfortable he might be, he just seems to… accept his position.

Actually, now I think about it, it's more that his being uncomfortable actually makes him more likely to… dig in, to double down on whatever's happening, as if increasing his investment in a thing will somehow make it easier to endure.

To give you an example, I first met him about seven years ago, when he was twenty-six. At that point he'd just got out of his first *real* relationship, and it was one that had lasted nearly a decade. To hear him talk about it, it sounded like he'd never actually been happy. I mean, it didn't even sound like happiness was a *consideration* for him when thinking about it. For the last – four years of the relationship, she had just treated him worse and worse, taken more and more liberties, and he'd just tried to – shrug it off. He still does. He wasn't even the one to end things. She'd found herself a rich older guy, fresh from a divorce, and just – disappeared. Something Greg once described as "fair enough, I suppose."

Oh, as another example, when I was first getting to know Greg, I went for a drink with him, that I mistakenly thought was romantic. I mean, he's not a bad looking guy. But *he'd* intended the evening as purely platonic. Do you know how long we "dated," before I

realized what had happened and actually *pressed* him on the whole misunderstanding? Two months. Sometimes I think if I'd just been a little more oblivious, we'd be married by now.

Anyway, all of this is to try and explain why, when it started to get really weird, Greg didn't just quit the job. I mean, it's a freelance web project, and from what he said it doesn't even *pay* very well. He wouldn't be breaking any contract, and *(breath)* the client hardly ever even gets in touch. There is no reason he couldn't just walk away, but I honestly don't think he ever will. And I really don't know how it's going to end for him.

I knew it was going to be bad as soon as he started telling me about it; I mean, Greg doesn't really *talk* about work unless something's gone badly and he wants to *not* listen to me tell him to drop whatever project he's locked himself into.

And this job was red flags all the way down. *(sigh)* An email out of the blue from what looked like a personal address rather than a business one. Vague, occasionally contradictory descriptions of what they actually wanted the site to do; I mean – even the email was a bit strange, not the broken or algorithmic English I'd have expected; the short passage was – quite well-composed.

But for some reason, something in it caused the font to appear incredibly large, and Greg had had to scroll through almost word by word. None of it was exactly what you'd call a good sign, but… Greg being Greg, he was taking a train down to Guildford before you know it, to meet the client in person. Small coffeeshop just off

the High Street.

As he told it, she was young, rail-thin underneath an oversized brown hoodie, which she kept pulled up, trying to cover up a network of pale stitches that stretched over one side of her head. She didn't – say much, other than to briefly outline the job. She wanted a forum made, though she couldn't seem to explain exactly what audience or topic she wanted it to be targeted towards, or why she couldn't use one of the countless online services that specifically made and admined forums. She just mumbled something about custom requirements and told Greg to drink his latte, which he did, so he tells me, though he can't stand milk in his coffee. All through it she just kept staring at him, hands pressed into the pockets of her hoodie, occasionally pushing long, spindly fingers out against the fabric, smiling to herself.

I haven't given the name of this mystery client because, to be honest, Greg's never told me. I've asked him, plenty of times, but whenever I do, he gives me this… surprised look, insists he's told me before, and then immediately forgets and changes the subject. I know that's not exactly helpful, but – honestly I'm a bit lost here myself. I mean – none of this feels normal, some of it doesn't even feel *natural*. Greg's an odd one, sure, but – until recently, he's always been very sharp.

This was all about six months ago. He's been working on the website ever since. Set up took him all of two days, maybe more, since the client insisted on him coding from scratch. It was bare bones, since he'd been given no copy, or indication of how it was to

be organized, except for the name of the site: **Chelicerae**, which he made sure stood prominently at the top in a tasteful Sans Serif.

The client had requested only a single area where threads could be posted, labeled ‘come in.’ Of course, there was never anything in there. The site was called Chelicerae, but the URL, the web address, was nothing like the name. Just a long string of numbers and letters with no pattern or reason to them, almost impossible to memorize. Once the site was live, Greg would get an email every few weeks with a new domain name, another long string of gibberish, and he would have to change it all over.

There were… other things, though, that the client would email through. Things that she insisted were included not on the website itself, but in the code. I-I’m not really a computer person, but according to Greg, they had nothing to do with any coding language he’d ever seen. Meaningless strings of words, or weird little fragments of poetry, or a name, different every time, repeated over and over again, hundreds of times. He tried to explain to her, more than once, that just pasting these things into the code wouldn’t – cause them to appear on the page, or have any effect at all. But she insisted, so he did it. And he’s been doing it ever since.

He’s on some sort of retainer to administrate the site, and this amounts to changing the domain name every few weeks, checking the statistics that, yes, still no one has visited, and pasting whatever the latest nonsense the client wants in the code. I’d have said it was good money for doing basically nothing, except that for the last two months it’s all started to go… really, really weird.

It started with an email he got from a hotmail address he didn't recognize. The subject line was simply "Are you the Chelicerae?" At first, Greg thought his client must have passed his details on, but opening the message, there were just four more words: "Please make it stop."

[The static of the tape recorder in the background gets louder.]

Now, Greg being Greg, he just – deleted the message and pretended it didn't bother him. But after he told me about it, I pressed him further, and he admitted that it wasn't the first unsettling email he'd gotten from strangers about the site. He wouldn't tell me the others. He kept insisting that I drop it, that it was fine. That I shouldn't worry. But of course I did worry. I knew that, *secretly*, he was as well.

I started to do a bit of – searching online, just to see if there was anything we were missing. And there was. A lot, as it turns out. I-It didn't take more than an hour or so to discover that Greg had apparently found himself the web administrator for an urban legend.

The *Chelicerae* popped up on the occasional paranormal site or edgy message board, each time accompanied by a now-defunct link. According to those who followed such things, all you had to do was start a new thread as a Guest, something Greg had been instructed to make sure was possible, and the title of that thread should be the

name of someone you want dead.

As the stories went, you would receive a reply almost immediately, and it would simply ask you for a story. You would have to write out, and post, in full, a horrible event that had happened to you, or someone that you loved. All the instructions were very clear that the target would only die, if the account satisfied the "Story-spinner." None of them made any mention of what would happen if it did not.

Pretty standard fare spooky stuff; at least, I would have thought so, if it hadn't been for the messages that Greg kept getting. Someone more technically adept than him had clearly found his email associated with the site, and had posted about it, so he had become the de facto mailbox for this… *(sigh)* forum.

Greg swore blind the site had never received any visitors at all, never had a single thing posted in it.

But still the emails came.

[The static increases intensity again.]

"Bring them back." "What is happening?" "I'm sorry I lied."

It's been getting to him; I know it has. He's lost weight. He rarely goes out anymore, and, judging by the cobwebs, he definitely doesn't clean his house like he used to. I've *tried* talking to him, but it's like talking to a brick wall that refuses to admit it's crumbling.

That's why it's me here rather than him; I mean – I had to talk to *someone.*

We were… walking home from The Cricketer's, uhh, a pub just off Horsell Birch. We were heading back to his house, since I'd missed my last train, and when that happened I tended to sleep on his sofa. We were turning down into his road when there was a small voice from a doorway next to us, asking for help.

Now, the last few years there had been a lot more homeless folk around Woking – I know, welcome to Tory Britain – but my point is, Greg usually made a point of giving whatever change he had left from the pub to… whoever we stumbled across on our way back. So when we heard this, he turned towards the voice and held out his hand towards the dark, crumpled shape, offering some change. *(pause)*

What grabbed his wrist was not a hand. Not exactly, not – anymore. It was coarse and bony and covered in fine, sharp hairs. Greg screamed, falling backwards, pulling the figure under the street lamp where, for a second, I saw it more completely than he did.

It was definitely human once. At least, based on how it was screaming. But it was thin, with bits of twisted and discolored, covered in small, scurrying shapes. Its face was the most human part of it remaining. Except for the two black and hollow spaces where its eyes once were. From which now poured an endless stream of scuttling legs and fangs. Its mouth was full of them too, but I could see, as it grasped desperately at Greg; it was trying to

say: “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Tell her I’m sorry,” but words were not what tumbled from those lips.

We ran, of course; th-the thing was frantic but clumsy, and it wasn’t difficult to get away. I wanted to go to the police, to tell them everything, but Greg – *refused,* of course. He said there must have been some mistake, that it was just a-a tramp, with an unfortunate condition. That he wasn’t going to bother the police, just because we’d had a bit of a shock. I didn’t have the energy to argue with him. I still don’t, really.

I don’t know what to think. Greg’s my best friend, but I might have to stop seeing him. He’s still working on that site, updating the domain name, still pasting gibberish into the code. I think he might be part of something really awful, and I don’t know how to make him see that.

If I had… a little bit more courage, I might just hang around a few message boards I know, waiting for a link to the Chelicerae. Waiting to post a name that might end it. *(pause)* I’ve got a story for it, all right. But I won’t. I’m just – too much of a coward, I suppose. So I guess I’m telling it to *you* instead. For all the good that’ll do.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends. *(shaky sigh)*

The Web does seem to have a preference for those who prefer not to assert themselves. The investigation is tricky – I don’t want to impose on Basira, and obviously Melanie and – *(brief noise)* –

Martin aren't available.

But I did do some light searching myself on Gregory Cox. Vanished, unsurprisngly. Sometime in late July 2016, which I think is… *(mirthless laugh)* two years ago. That doesn't seem right. It doesn't feel like – There's just this great… gap of time where I wasn't.

No notes or followup here that I can see, just… *(sigh)* It looks like this statement came in just after Gertrude disappeared. Another gap. And whoever took it didn't do any follow-up, just… filed it away. I may be the first person to actually read it, so… *(same mirthless cough of a laugh)* Sorry, Angie. I suppose. *(sigh)*

There's a small supplemental document with it, though, that is a – bit alarming. I-It's apparently a list of people whose names appeared in the various pieces of text Mr. Cox was pasting into the code. It's unclear if they were meant to be users or victims, but I cannot help but note that there seem to be the names of several statement givers who found their way to the Institute, including noted arachnophobe Carlos Vittery. Perhaps a coincidence, just people shopping their traumatic incidents around, but…but I have to wonder… how much their actions were their own.

I have no theories on this. No – no sudden insights. *(sigh)* I wish I could talk it through with Martin. Or Tim. Or Sasha. But we never really did that, did we? *(sigh)* Everything's changed. *(shaky, long breath)*

Two days out of a coma, and I'm already tired.

[Pause.]

End recording.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG124 – Left Hanging

Statement #0121112

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Julian Jennings regarding a cable car journey up the Untersberg mountain in Austria. Original statement given 11th December, 2012. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

The part that really gets me is that it wasn't even our first time going up that cable car. I mean, none of it makes sense; it was all impossible, and the terrible things that happened while we were hanging there absolutely could not have happened. But given that they did, I don't understand why they happened to *us*. There was nothing – special about *us*, nothing remarkable about our trip. Were we just random bystanders to something awful? We must have been, because I don't see why anyone would choose for something to happen to us. It must have been the old man, of course, but again, why?

My father passed away almost twelve years ago, now. Pancreatic cancer. I'm sure I don't need to explain that it was devastating, probably the first true grief I've ever felt, but in the years that followed, I found that it brought me much closer to my mum. Her and dad were always something of a unit, you see, and growing up I feel like I had less of a specific relationship with them as people, and more of a relationship with my *parents*. Not unusual, but once I moved out and started to get on with my own life, we ended up becoming a bit distant. And on the few times a year that I would see them, it was, again, going to visit my *parents*, without any real thought for the individual relationships.

This all ended with my father's death. Grief brought mum and me closer than we'd ever been before. I would call her regularly, and I'd make the trip up to Swansea at least once a month, until I finally moved back there four years ago. It was the second year after dad passed that we started our annual holiday together. At first it was just a way to get Mum more… interested in the world again, but soon enough it was a highlight of our year. We'd go for a week, normally, maybe two if I'd kept back enough annual leave. Mum wasn't great with flights, so we tended to keep ourselves to central or western Europe, though I got her as far as Corfu one year. Her big passion was mountains; we always had to go up a mountain.

Well, to be fair, it wasn't mountains she loved, specifically; it was views. There was little that delighted Mum quite as much as to see the whole of creation spread out before you like a carpet, and we would always burn through a good number of euros using whatever

coin-operated telescopes they'd set out at the lookout spot.

She also found an affinity for the thinner air of high altitudes. I never really understood how that worked, as I thought it was meant to make it *harder* to breathe, and after a few hours I always tended to get a bit of a headache. But mum took to it like nobody's business and after a minute or two was always more spry than I'd seen her the whole rest of the year.

Of course, at her age actually… *climbing* a mountain would have been a bit much, so our holidays were very much intended to be the highest peaks in central and western Europe that could be scaled by coach, train, or cable car. Well-supplied as many European mountains are with public transport options, this did limit us a bit. So, that's why this year we found ourselves returning to Salzburg, one of our first ever destinations, and to Untersberg, one of our favorite mountains. It towered distantly over the city. It was a marvelous view, if I recall, although the quickest and most reliable way to reach it was unfortunately by cable car.

You see, I don't do amazingly with heights. I wouldn't describe it as full vertigo, and certainly when we're actually at the top of the mountain, I don't have any problem at all if I steer clear of the edges. But, traditionally, getting from sea level up to the top is something of a trial to me, to say nothing of coming back down. I've never really shared these fears with Mum, of course; she got so much *joy* out of it that I wouldn't want to worry her.

Anyway, I remember the cable car up and down Untersberg was a

particularly uncomfortable one for me. As the car accelerated towards the rickety looking pylons, there was this judder as the runners abruptly changed angles, and the car would swing back and forth in such a way that I had to sit down on the floor. I told Mum this was because I found hard to balance, but honestly it was so I didn't have to look out the window at the ground almost a mile below.

When we arrived at the cable car station this time I was relieved to see that they had seemed to have replaced a lot of the structure since the first time we were there. The cables stretched up the mountain, fresh and strong, though still with that disconcerting curve t them, and there was a shine to the cars themselves that I really hoped wasn't just a fresh paint job.*(laugh)* Mum appeared quite composed, but in that way she does when she gets excited, and we bought our tickets and joined the queue without any problems.

It was near the end of the season, and we'd arrived as early as possible, so the queue in this case only comprised of one other passenger: an old man with stark white hair and a gentle, amused smile. He had a walking stick in his hand, though his back was straight as an arrow, and it seemed like he only remembered to use it in those moments when he noticed he was still holding it.

The day was clear, and the sun illuminated the inside of the car as we stepped over the gap from the platform. I knew we would be able to see for miles and miles from the top, something I was looking forward to doing when I had my feet *firmly on the mountain*,

less so from the swinging car.

The driver stood in the corner of the tiny metal box, looking at us with a bored expression and making some final checks on the controls, which amounted to two buttons and a phone. I sat, slightly unsteadily, on the rough steel bench, as mum and the old man took positions at two of the windows with the best view. The driver nodded to himself, slid the door closed, and turned a key in the control panel. There was a shuddering through the whole structure of the car as the wheels above us began to turn, and we began to climb towards the peak.

In some ways, the first minute is the worst. The climb takes just over eight minutes in total, but in those first few seconds you can see all the detail of the ground as it falls away from you, and you feel every meter of that widening space of open air beneath your feet, held at bay by a floor that seems… far too thin.

By the second minute, I'd calmed down slightly, the angle of the cable and our speed of ascent having leveled out, and the third minute was… almost peaceful. I risked a look over to mum, stood at the window looking out with a serene smile at the retreating ground. I glanced over to the old man, whose face beamed with excitement and… anticipation.

Minute four was when we hit the first of the three support towers, and the sudden change of angle and speed sent me gripping the edge of my seat, staring resolutely at the floor and willing myself to ignore the swaying of the car.

The fifth minute, I risked another look out the windows, just as we hit the second tower, and my stomach lurched. I sat back down again quickly, hoping the shaking of my legs wasn't audible to my mother, still staring out of her chosen window.

The sixth minute was the last stretch with just open air below us, and it would have been the final part before we hit the last tower and started traveling over the mountain itself. But that's when the car came to a sudden, juddering halt.

Panic immediately pumped through me, and I clenched my teeth together to try and hold in a cry. I took a moment and let out a shaky breath. It was fine. This sort of thing happened all the time, no doubt; just a small delay. Someone at the top taking too long for the car coming down the other way, maybe.

I glanced at the driver, and, sure enough, he had a look of puzzlement and irritation on his face, but nothing that could be read as concern, or fear. He picked up the phone next to the controls and started speaking annoyed German into it, but from his expression it didn't seem like he was getting any answers. I heard similar sounds of irritation from Mum, and gingerly looking over, I noticed that some low-level clouds had come about us, and the window was now covered with a fine, swirling mist, obscuring the view below.

The weather had been forecast as clear skies – but it wasn't unheard of. I would have hoped that not being able to see the earth, far below us, would have blunted the terror I felt as we hung there,

swinging gently, but instead it seemed worse, as all I could now picture was an unending, terrible void, stretching out below me.

I heard a small chuckle, and looked over to see the old man smiling to himself, his walking stick discarded on the floor.

What happened next was so fast I barely had time to process it. The old man turned towards the door of the cable car, the door I had seen the driver secure and lock when we first boarded… and he walked over to it. He gripped the handle, and with a single, easy motion, flung it open.

The driver saw what was happening and started to lunge to grab him, but it was too late. The old man turned back for just a second, looked me in the eyes and gave me a huge, theatrical wink. Then he fell backwards, out of the car, and was gone, into the swirling air beyond.

The driver shouted – *something* – and my mother let out a shriek, but the sounds disappeared into the muted skies surrounding us. The driver was back on the phone, desperately trying to get someone on the other end as the door just hung there, open into the nothingness beyond the car.

I wanted to act, to help, to do *something*, but I was pinned to my seat, with a confused fear. Then, without warning, and without any input from the driver, the car began to move again. It traveled upwards, gaining speed and swinging with such force I was afraid that we'd all we thrown out of the open door.

One minute. Two minutes.

Three minutes.

We should have hit another tower, or the top of the mountain by now, but we *just kept going,* higher, and higher, the clouds surrounding us tighter, flowing in through the open door. My mind had all but seized up, and I felt helpless to do anything but watch as events progressed.

I don't know how long we climbed before the car stopped again. Mum was crouched on the floor, now, gripping the handlebars above her for stability, and the driver was trying to get any response from the controls. The brakes finally started again with such grinding force that we must have pitched almost 45 degrees forward. Then back again. Then forward. I could feel nausea wash over me as I was almost thrown forward onto the floor. Then everything was still again, save for the gentle swaying.

The car remained in place for some time. I think we were all just waiting, for whatever was coming next. None of us spoke, and looking over at Mum I could see my own fear mirrored across her face. After a while, when everything had calmed down, the driver looked over to us. We were all quiet, afraid, I think, of breaking the stillness we found ourselves in. But I saw him start to edge towards the door. I knew what he was trying to do. He wanted to close it, lock it back in place and get *some* semblance of control back.

I wanted to tell him to stop, to warn him about – whatever was

about to happen, because I knew something was about to happen. But I could only stare at him as he slowly, *achingly* crawled towards his doom.

Sure enough, as he approached the opening, his hand just starting to reach out into the mist, I heard something on the cables stretched out behind us. I didn't turn around, but I could hear rhythmic, scraping sounds of something crawling rapidly towards us. I saw Mum's eyes focus on something behind my head, and she screamed. It was a sound I've never heard her make in my whole life, and one that I will never forget.

There was a thump from above, the sound of something heavy landing on the roof of the car, and the driver froze, arms still outstretched. His eyes widened in sudden realization, but before he could pull back from the edge, an arm, long, grey, and completely inhuman, reached down from above with terrible speed. It grabbed his wrist, just for a moment, and then he was gone, his own scream vanishing into the abyss beyond the door.

In the quiet that followed, Mum and I just stared at each other, neither of us knowing what we could do except wait for whatever fate was…squatting on top of the cable car. Then came three bangs, one after another on the roof of the car. Knock. Knock. Knock. Then a laugh. A terrible whistling sound, like the howling of a gale. And then…

I don't know when I noticed the green light on the control panel. The one next to the button the driver had held when we first started

the journey. It certainly hadn't been lit the last time we were moving. Maybe not since the first time we stopped.

I couldn't afford to let hope come into my heart, knew that would be too cruel, but I also knew I couldn't ignore it. I finally, painfully stood up. My whole body was shaking so violently I thought I would collapse before I'd even taken my first step, but little by little I inched my way towards it, never taking my eyes off the green light. Never looking towards the door.

When my fingers finally found the button, I slammed it with all the strength I had left in me, and I felt the car begin to move upwards again. I have no idea if whatever was on top of the car was still there, but when I saw the third tower rising up out of the clouds, I could feel myself weeping with relief. I didn't even feel the juddering as we hit it.

I don't remember much after that. I don't think I was making much sense. I know it took them a long time to get us back down from the top of Untersberg without using the cable car. I remember talking to the police, even if I don't remember whether I told them the truth.

I think the official story became that the driver, a man named Otto Hessler, had killed himself halfway up the mountain by leaping to his death. The body was never found, and the report made no mention of an old man.

I still get nightmares, of course, and my fear of heights has

worsened considerably. I've tried talking to professionals about it, but for the most part they treat it as though I'm talking in metaphors. And I generally let them believe that.

The worst part is the strain the whole affair has put on my relationship with my mother. She… refuses to admit any of it happened, repeating the same version of events given by the Salzburg police. She looks me right in the eyes and tells me she doesn't know what I'm talking about, that there was no old man or clouds. Nothing climbing the cables behind me. We both know she's lying. I don't know if there'll be any more holidays, certainly none that involve mountains. *(shaky breath)*

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

(sighs) Simon Fairchild is one of the… recurrent figures that I think disquiets me the most. Not simply for what he *does*, the endless spaces of height or depth to which he's so quick to condemn his victims, but… the *joy* he seems to take in doing so. And I don't think there is much to this tale beyond that; an evil man tormenting and killing simply for his own pleasure, and to feed the power that sustains him. *(sigh)* In other cases, I might…think the location noteworthy, might try to piece together some wider plan, but Fairchild seems to travel far and wide for his victims, with no motivation other than… *variety*. I do not think I ever wish to meet him.

Of course… even if I did want to do research into this statement I wouldn't have any help doing so. It's been a week and Melanie's attitude towards me hasn't softened. And Basira, though she is very willing to talk, still doesn't seem to trust me enough to let me in on whatever plans she might have. If she has any plans at all, of course. I could – *make* her tell me; I know that, but… I can't afford to burn any more bridges.

Still no sign of Peter Lukas of course, *(sighs)* or Mar–

[A small static begins to build slightly in the background.]

Wait. Wait.

[He gets out of his chair and opens the door.]

Martin! *(slightly louder)* **Martin!**

MARTIN

(surprised) Oh – *(pause, seems to compose himself)* Hi, John.

ARCHIVIST

Martin, i-i-i-it's – I-I, I-I haven't seen you!

MARTIN

Yeah. Sorry.

ARCHIVIST

W-What, where, where have you been, I, I mean I,I thought –

MARTIN

Oh – No, no I've, I've been here, I just, um, y'know… been busy.

ARCHIVIST

Busy.

MARTIN

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Working for Lukas.

MARTIN

Ah, N-no, P-Peter's – *(sighs) [[clipped syllable]] (composes himself)*
It's complicated.

[Beat.]

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

Anyway, I… should, uh *[get back to]* –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) H-how are you, Martin? I-Is everything…

MARTIN

Yeah. Yeah, no, I'm, I'm alright, uh… everything's… fine.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Um… how's… h-how's the poetry?

MARTIN

Oh, uh, well, I haven't exactly had a lot of time recently, so…

ARCHIVIST

Yes, of course.

[Martin *hms*]

ARCHIVIST

You've been busy.

MARTIN

Yeah.

[Pause.]

Look, John, I – *(sighs)* I've really got to go –

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Okay.

MARTIN

(overlapping) I'm sorry.

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) W,w,we'll – it was – good – *(softer)* It was good to see you.

MARTIN

…Yeah.

[The Archivist sighs under his breath as Martin walks away.]

ARCHIVIST

Yeah…

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG125 – Civilian Casualties

Statement #9931907

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Sergeant Terrence Simpson, regarding an outbreak of violence in the crofting community of Lancraig, Ross-shire. Original statement given 19th July, 1993. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

The thing is I wasn't even responding to a call out. Well, I mean I was, but it was a break-in about ten miles further on, and I just wasn't in a hurry. I mean, Lancraig is the sort of place you don't even notice you've been through if you're not looking. A half mile of road with a handful of white or stone cottages dotting the fields. Nothing you'd recognize as a shop, and it's two miles the other way to the post office.

Lancraig is what they write on the map, but to most people it's just… more empty highland. It's like that with a lot of old crofting communities. They've all got their little parcel of land for farming and a big ol' stretch to keep the sheep together, but it's a poor life, really, and hard work. Lends itself to isolation well. Too well, sometimes.

I knew Callum McKenzie, or at the very least, he knew me. Again, not well, but North Highlands police tend to serve a lot of very small communities, and *(laughs)* I stood out like a sore thumb. He called me "the bastard English," but he always did it with a smile on his face. His little house served as a pub for those minded to use it; he didn't have a license, but if the landlord didn't mind, who was going to raise a stink about it? I could've, I guess, but it would have been a damn stupid thing to do, turn them all against me. He even showed me the still he kept out back, once, and I'm very thankful I was on duty at the time, or I might've had to drink some out of politeness.

So I'm driving, heading over towards this break-in over in *[Delnessy,]* when Constable Carla Ross, my partner, starts telling me to slow down. Now, Ross had known Callum a lot longer than I had, being about ten years my senior on the force, and had a good twenty years experience policing these communities. I dropped speed, and she stared out at one of the crofts next to us, making this little noise of uncertainty. I was just about to speed up again when she gasped, and yelled to stop the car.

There wasn't really anywhere to park, but the road was wide

enough to pass on, and barely saw two cars in an hour, so I just stopped where we were, and we got out. Staring out over the low, stone wall, I could see a figure, stood in the middle of the field. Took me a moment to recognize Callum McKenzie, holding a pitchfork as he looked out over his croft.

But no… the angle was wrong. He – he wasn't *holding* his pitchfork, he was just – gripping the handle. And I realized, with a jolt, that the sharp tines were buried in his stomach.

From this angle, I could just about make out the ends of them, protruding from his back. And suddenly everything seemed very still. Ross acted before I did; she vaulted over the wall and started running towards Callum, calling his name, and I followed a second after her. But then he turned, and we both stopped short. I can't exactly say what it was in his turn that so unsettled me. Maybe it was too violent, too smooth. It seemed like the pitchfork should have flown out of him, but it stayed wedged in place.

Maybe it was something in his eyes, or that *smile* of his. Or maybe just the sheer amount of blood on him that didn't seem right for the neat punctures that we'd seen. Then he turned, and began to run towards us at a dead sprint, pushing the handle that protruded from his torso towards us like a battering ram. I called to him to stay still, to wait there, while we got help, but he just. Kept coming.

Then Ross told him to stop, and I could hear in her voice that she was afraid of him. I was, too. As he got closer, I saw him let go of the bloody pitchfork and drop his hands to his sides like claws.

Broken glass was pressed into his fingers, glinting red in the morning sun, and I knew with absolute certainty that he intended to kill us.

The moment before he reached us, I grabbed the handle that still stuck from his belly. It was pure instinct, and my hands exploded in sharp pains as splinters from the rough wooden handle dug into my fingers and palm, but Callum McKenzie stopped dead, with a horrible lurch as the metal prongs buried themselves still deeper. Ross stood there, baton in hand, clearly desperate not to use it as Callum swung his glass covered arms at me, trying to slash my face, and coming within an inch or two of doing so, only kept at bay by the distance of the pitchfork's handle.

I finally got a look at his eyes, expected to see mania, or a glassy stare… but when they met mine, they were clear, and focused. His smile got wider. *"Bastard English,"* he snarled, and paused a moment, assessing the situation. With a grunt of effort, he pushed himself further onto the tines of the fork, moving slowly, agonizingly up them, desperately trying to make it those last few inches to reach my throat.

Then there was the sound of something tearing, and I think he must have ruptured something, because his legs went out from under him, and where blood had been oozing before, it now began to gush. He choked, as it started to fill his throat, and I tried, I really tried, to reach out and help him, but he still slashed out at me with those mutilated hands. And I couldn't get close enough.

Then it was quiet. Ross still stood there, baton raised in exactly the same position, seemingly frozen in confusion, and disgust. She looked at me as if I might have any explanation, but what the hell was I supposed to say? We just kept looking at this broken man, her friend, who had literally killed himself attacking us.

I went back to the car to radio for help, but it – it didn't seem to be working right; all I could hear from it was the – *(steadying breath)* – faint noise of static, and… what sounded like bagpipes. I walked back over to Ross, who was now crouched over the body of Callum McKenzie. She looked up at me and shook her head slowly. Standing back up, I could see her hand was slick and red. Then she pointed silently over my shoulder.

My breathing was erratic, and I could feel the tell-tale signs of shock beginning to creep into my body, but I forced myself to turn around. All I could see was the white, one-story cottage behind me. But then my eyes fixed on the broken window, and the streaks of blood around the door. I knew what she was thinking, and I just nodded, took out my own baton, and quietly approached the small house.

It was… silent. No sound at all, save the bleating of a sheep in a nearby field. I've never quite got the hang of *sheep*. I know that sounds daft, but… it's their throats, you see. They're so like humans, that when they… baa, it doesn't – it doesn't sound like a sheep – Does that make sense? It sounds like a *person* pretending to be a sheep. Sheep don't kill each other, though. Not like this.

Anyway, the sound didn't exactly do anything to put me at my ease. When we entered the house, I instinctively reached out for a light switch, but couldn't find one. A-a lot of these old crofter places don't have any electricity, or at least not mains power. It didn't matter, though. There were plenty of windows to light up the scene in front of us.

The fireplace had long since burned out, but the rocking chair next to it was still occupied. An elderly woman sat there, a blanket over her legs, and a cross-stitch frame in her lap. If it wasn't for the cook's knife that pinned her to the chair through the throat, I'd have almost called her serene. Her feet didn't quite touch the floor, so the draft from the open door rocked her back and forth, back and forth.

On the floor in front of her, two corpses, middle-aged, with rough, weathered faces, were entwined together in an embrace that almost looked affectionate. Until you saw the blood staining their teeth and hands, or the ear still clenched in the younger man's smile, fresh torn from the other's head. They had each had their own throats cut, crudely, and plastered across their faces was a smile that seemed to occupy a frozen space halfway between ecstasy and an all-consuming anger. Neither of them had any fingers left at all.

Their murderer was in the kitchen, head forced into an oven, now cold, and burned beyond recognition. The bloody vegetable knife was limp in her hand, and the glass embedded in the back of her neck placed her death firmly at the feet of Callum McKenzie. At this, Ross let out a small cry, and left the room to be sick.

I was feeling completely numb by now, and felt nothing but a dull fascination when I saw the circle pattern of cuts on the dead woman's arm. The angles made it almost certainly self-inflicted, and it gave the impression the skin was a simple tug from coming away like a peeled potato.

The back door was kicked in, and I could see a small lump of pink flesh just beyond it. And then another. The ground was disturbed as if by a struggle, and I suddenly realized what had happened. Ross had returned by now, shaking and pale, but just as quiet as I was, and together we followed a trail of bitten-off fingers like breadcrumbs taking us home. Home, in this case, was the lawn just outside the cottage of Angus Stewart, an acre or so of land he kept clear for meetings or parties or… whatever other events the tiny community might find they needed space for. Yesterday, it had been the parking of a small sky-blue transit van.

I recognized it of course. It belonged to a young lady from Inverness – I never got her name – who ran a small, mobile lending library that traveled around the villages and crofts of the highlands. Now, she lay at the center of… absolute carnage. Eventually it would be conclusively established that all sixteen other residents of Lancraig were there, though to simply look at the scene it was impossible to tell mud from blood from flesh from bone, and I thank god every day that not one resident of that poor, doomed place had children.

The head of Angus Stewart leered up at me from the ground, lips parted in that same expression of fury and joy, cheeks latticed with steel sheep wire. A sudden thought struck me, that, since our

struggle on arriving with Callum McKenzie, neither myself nor Constable Ross had made any noise at all. If there were survivors, they had no way to know it was safe.

Abruptly, I shouted, calling for anyone who might still be alive, telling them they could come out. I tried to ignore the edge of panic in my voice, but my only answer was the mocking bleating of sheep, and those impossibly distant pipes. Ross glared at me, clearly startled by my shouting, and stepped gingerly through the dirt and viscera towards the center. Neither of us could pretend we cared about preserving evidence at that point. These people, good people, had slaughtered each other for no reason at all, and there was nothing we could do to change that fact.

I don't know exactly how the woman who ran the library van died – at a certain point the injuries sort of all seemed to… bleed together, if you'll excuse the expression. All I could see for certain is that she held a book in her hands. It was a paperback, old and unloved, with obvious signs of wear long before it found itself in this chaos. The cover and title were unrecognizable, now far too soaked in blood, but it was clear that at some point while holding it, the woman had torn it clean in two down the spine, and now held half in each of what was left of her hands. Ross told me later that she'd gotten a good look at the pages, and that every single one of them was blank.

That was when our backup arrived. It looked like whatever strangeness had affected the radio had been only on our side, and my frantic messages had reached the station loud and clear. It was a

whole mess, for a long time – you might have read about it in some of the papers; I think the official report covered it as a 'drunken brawl that got out of hand.' It wasn't, obviously, and no one who was actually there signed the report, but almost everyone who actually dealt with the scene got signed off several weeks with stress, so… didn't get to have much say in the matter.

There really didn't need to be any proper cover-up. It was an isolated place, and the folk who had still been living there were on the older side, with little real connection to the outside world. I guess the media doesn't really care about crofters, especially once the police had swept up the more gory details.

I moved back to Macclesfield shortly afterwards. It pretty much ended my marriage, since my wife was why I'd moved up to Inverness in the first place. *(shaky breath)* But I just couldn't go on up there. I can't stand the sound of bagpipes, and sometimes, at night, I still hear sheep in the distance.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends. Hm. An Englishman returning from Scotland with a fear of bagpipes and sheep. I'm sure we can all relate. *(hm)* In many ways the Slaughter fascinates me. There seems to be, in all cases, a question at its heart about control. Is it a mindless dance, dragging participants along by the beat of a drum, or is there a kernel of will in there, lucidity and deliberateness to the random fury and violence? I suppose that's the question with so much of violence, war. How much are you really in command of yourself, or others?

I'm not sure what scares me more: the idea that deep down, everyone is in complete control of their actions, that everything is, on some level, intentional; or that ultimately we don't have any control of ourselves at all, and the rest is just… rationalization. *(shaky breath)*

Another Leitner, obviously. Not one I can readily identify, though it sounds like it would now be… inert, anyway. Given the blank pages, I do wonder whether its destruction was a last-ditch effort to stop its effects, or the exact thing that released its power in such an… extreme way. Regardless, I've hit another research dead-end with this.

It's… frustrating, to be honest. I finally feel myself; I feel… focused, and ready, and I find myself basically alone. I'm now sure Martin is actually avoiding me. *(shaky breath)* Basira was right about the Institute being watched, though. In the last week I've seen two different people wearing symbols for the People's Church of the Divine Host, and it's rare I go anywhere without cobwebs, anymore.

I, uh, find myself keeping my guard up around mannequins, as well, though I'll admit, that one is more likely to be my own projection. *(sigh)* But honestly it's the internal threats *I'm* worried about. Peter Lukas is just – sitting up there, doing whatever the hell it is he and Elias have planned, and Melanie –

[The Archivist doesn't notice, but low static begins and immediately begins to increase in volume.]

ARCHIVIST

– still has that bullet pumping violence into her, waiting to turn this place into another Lancraig. I just wish there was – *(confused)* What? – *(continues)*

Wait. I d-didn't – Did I read that somewhere? Or…

(lets out a breath) Well, right, yes. *(clears his throat)* The bullet didn't show up on electronic or mechanical scans, but it's still lodged in her leg, just above the tibia. And it's been getting slowly infected ever since – I need to find Basira.

[He gets up to leave.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, MELANIE'S CAMP BED]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The Archivist takes a deep breath.]

ARCHIVIST

You're sure about this?

BASIRA

No. But if you're right, I don't see what choice we've got.

ARCHIVIST

No, I mean…

BASIRA

Oh, yeah, the stuff she takes is pretty strong these days. She should be out for a while. *(off of Archivist)* What, sleep is hard.

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

You've been staying here too.

BASIRA

Got a camp bed at the other end, near the tunnels. I like to keep an eye on them.

[She starts opening a box.]

BASIRA

Besides, I wanted to give her some space, you know?

[Some packaging crinkles as it's handled.]

BASIRA

But, yeah, living outside the Institute's just not safe anymore.

ARCHIVIST

What about Martin?

BASIRA

I think he's still got a place? He's not down here, anyway.

ARCHIVIST

Right. *(breath)* So, how, how does the –

BASIRA

Do you want to get on with this or not?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, right, sorry. You, uh, you managed to get the anesthetic?

BASIRA

Here. The guy said it was a nerve block, should numb pretty much the whole leg.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Right. Was it hard to come by?

BASIRA

(flat) No, I just popped down Superdrug.

(duh) Yes, it was hard to come by.

ARCHIVIST

Do – you couldn't get any general anesthetic, knock her out fully?

BASIRA

Oh, sure, did your spooky brain tell you the right dosage to not *kill* her?

ARCHIVIST

N-no, it didn't.

BASIRA

Then it's got to be the local.

Here, get on with it.

ARCHIVIST

What, me?

BASIRA

Yeah. She comes around, she's going to kill someone, and, you know, not it.

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

Fine, give it here.

[He opens the box.]

BASIRA

The guy said you'd need to hit the right nerve for it to work. Do you know much about –

ARCHIVIST

Here.

BASIRA

You sure?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

Okay, go for it.

ARCHIVIST

(steadying breaths) Right.

BASIRA

And pray the injection doesn't wake her.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, **thank** you, Basira. You're sure we shouldn't just… tell her?

BASIRA

I really don't know how she'd take it. Not well. If we want to get it out of her, this is it.

ARCHIVIST

…Okay.

[Silence as he steadies himself, then injects her with the anesthetic. A shaky breath of relief as nothing happens.]

ARCHIVIST

Right. How long does it take?

[Ratting as Basira checks the packaging and/or the needle is placed back in its box.]

BASIRA

About half an hour, he said.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

BASIRA

You better be right about this.

ARCHIVIST

I am.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, MELANIE'S CAMP BED, THIRTY MINUTES LATER]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The Archivist sounds much closer when he speaks. He's whispering, a bit.]

ARCHIVIST

Right, pass me the scissors.

BASIRA

What? I thought you had the scalpel.

ARCHIVIST

For the trouser leg!

BASIRA

Oh – right.

[She hands him the scissors, and he cuts through the leg of Melanie's trousers.]

ARCHIVIST

God, look at that.

[That same static from earlier in his office is back, and it again begins to intensify.]

BASIRA

I don't – It's a leg.

ARCHIVIST

No, inside.

BASIRA

I don't know what you're seeing, John.

ARCHIVIST

It's – christ, it's all rotten.

BASIRA

Can you see the bullet?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

You're ready?

[The Archivist laughs dryly.]

ARCHIVIST

No. You're sure you don't have – restraints, or –

BASIRA

You think she's going to sleep through being tied down? I'll try and grab her if she wakes, but…

ARCHIVIST

(takes a deep breath) Okay. Here we go.

[One last set of shaky breaths before he begins to cut into Melanie's leg in the worst form of homemade surgery. We can hear the squelch of the scalpel as it hits flesh, amidst John's breathing.]

[Then the bullet is removed, and both Basira and Archivist let out relieved sighs. At least, until –]

MELANIE

GET OFF ME! GET OFF OF ME!

[Something slams, most likely Melanie lashing out. The following is chaos, all overlapping and confusion and slams and mishandled medical equipment:]

ARCHIVIST

OH JESUS; Get her, she's awake –

MELANIE

GET AWAY!

[Melanie pushes something and it crashes on the floor, likely either the scalpel or the scissors.]

ARCHIVIST

[She's] not supposed to *[unintelligible]* –

BASIRA

Melanie, it's okay –

ARCHIVIST

Listen, what the *[an–]*

BASIRA

Melanie, I've got you_[r]_ *[unintelligible]* –

MELANIE

DON'T TOUCH ME –

[She stabs John with *something,* and -]

ARCHIVIST

AAAH! AAAAH!

MELANIE

I'LL KILL YOU, I'LL KILL YOU –

BASIRA

Alright, *[I'm right]* behind you; John, run.

ARCHIVIST

[unintelligible] [let's] go.

BASIRA

Just go!

ARCHIVIST

[I don't think she] knows –

MELANIE

I CAN’T FEEL MY LEG; I CAN’T FEEL –

ARCHIVIST

It’s just anesthetic! It’s just –

BASIRA

We have to get out of here now!

MELANIE

GET AWAY FROM ME –

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG126 – Sculptor's Tool

Statement #0091110

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The Archivist is flipping through some papers when he winces and lets out a sigh of pain.]

ARCHIVIST

(clearing throat) Statement of Debra Madaki regarding an adult art class she took in the spring of 2004, and her interactions with *Gabriel,* a fellow student. Original statement given 11th October, 2009. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

So, there's a community center about five minutes walk from my house. Used to be they only ever hired out the hall for… weddings, parties – occasional public events. But about five, six years ago they got a new organizer in – Jenny. Lovely woman. Young. Very keen on making the community center just that – the center of the community. So she put together this huge program of adult

education classes.

Mostly just the standard stuff, uh dance, life drawing, yoga, computer skills, but there were a few that were a bit more out there. They had a cheese-making course that ended with us all bringing in our somewhat less-than-successful cheeses and pairing them with wines. Still amazing no one got food poisoning from that one. And there was a fire-eating workshop, once. I didn't go to that one.

Anyway, I'd become great friends with Jenny through the church choir, and since George was off to university and Rosa was generally working evenings, I tended to be alone until about ten or eleven most days. So obviously, I started going to as many classes as I could. It was a great way to… meet friends, uh learn new skills, and, uh, as she always reminded me, spend a good portion of Rosa's paycheck.

Now about a year after Jenny had taken over, the workshop schedule started listing a biweekly sculpting class. Which was great news, because I'd been telling Rosa just the day before that life drawing and watercolours were all very well, but I really like to get a bit more hands-on with making art. Then Rosa made an off-colour joke about life drawing and getting – hands-on, and I forgot about it, but I still ended up going to the class.

There were only a few of us, learning to sculpt, probably because the class had quite a high materials cost, and was a bit earlier than the others. There was me; Mary, who uh, works in the Post Office;

Bill, who I knew from walking his dog; and Ray Quinton, who was actually teaching the class, though I didn't know him outside of that.

And then there was – *him*. The man who introduced himself as "Gabriel," was short and squat, with knobbly bare arms that seemed to reach down almost to his knees. *(breath)* He had dark hair he claimed he only kept short because he thought no one would notice how greasy it was, and his face jutted out – like it was – trying to escape his skull.

Now, I'm not one to judge on appearances; I was the one who insisted Desmond still come to church after his operation, so please don't think it was his ugliness that set me against that – horrid little man. There was just something about the way he moved, as if he was always too close, right into your personal space, but then you'd look again, and h-he wasn't. When he walked up to me without warning and introduced himself, I only just managed to stop myself *obviously* recoiling. It was just a feeling.

So our first lessons were very basic, all about how to properly move and shape the clay, how to use armatures, and the different tools, and how they interacted with the material. We weren't really doing much in terms of actual sculpting, just listening and watching Ray do his demonstrations.

At least me, Bill, and Mary were watching him. *Gabriel* seemed quite content to ignore our teacher entirely, focusing instead on the lump of clay in front of him. His rough, sausage-like fingers twisted

and warped it with ease.

I found it a difficult, heavy material to work with, never quite as wet as I needed it to be, no matter how much water I added, but looking over at Gabriel it was like it was alive in his hands, eagerly bending itself into whatever shape he wanted. And those shapes were… odd.

I remember one of our earlier projects was just to do a fish, just a rough shape of a fish, nice and simple. Ray had even pre-made some armatures for us. I mean, I still struggled, and Mary and Bill had a good ol' go at it, but over in the corner Gabriel just began grabbing and molding and… twisting into a shape that was… well it certainly wasn't a fish. It sort of – *almost* started out like a fish. But it just kept *going* and going, looping back and into itself, as if it was swimming through its own body. After a half hour, I had almost completely forgotten my own work, instead just staring at this serpentine structure that the dreadful man was building.

The most infuriating part was that whenever Ray would pass his table, he'd just nod, gently to himself, and trade a few words with Gabriel as if whatever it was he was trying to make was in any way similar to the practice we'd been assigned.

I know, it was an amateur class, and he was under no obligation to do exactly the work as instructed, but Ray was very clear with the rest of us that we were doing things in a specific order for a reason, and it was just a bit frustrating to see him nodding along to that awful man flagrantly disregarding what we were meant to be doing.

At one point, Gabriel must have noticed me staring. He looked back at me for the longest time, far longer than I was comfortable with, and then he picked up his nasty spiraling clay fish and walked over towards me. I could feel my hairs standing on end as he got closer, and he held it towards my face. He asked me if I could help him, because he was having a bit of a creative block, and I remember thinking – he had the palest eyes I'd ever seen. Then my gaze focused back on the thing in his hands, that *dead*, curling lump of clay, and I watched it move.

It coiled around, through its own face, and flailed its long, distorted fins in desperate pained movements. It made a noise that sounded like a scream heard through water and stretched out towards my mouth, which I'll admit was hanging open in horror. If I hadn't screamed and fallen backwards, I am sure the thing would have dived down my throat.

The others rushed over to me, making all the appropriate noises of surprise and concern, but I could only watch as Gabriel rushed back to his bench and started to furiously work on his sculpture again. He looked over at me, and I heard him speak quite clearly, though no one else reacted to it: "What an excellent idea," he said. "An excellent direction indeed."

I quit the class after that. I emailed Ray to explain that I would no longer be attending and left it at that. Obviously, I didn't tell him exactly what I'd seen, but I thought some general references to inappropriate behaviour from one of the other students would get my point across. And then I continued with my life, and didn't give

Gabriel another thought.

At least, not until I went to my salsa class the following Thursday, and instead found myself walking into a room set up for sculpture. I was obviously taken aback at what had to be a really significant scheduling issue, but having a quick check of the timetable of classes, it looked very much like sculpting had always been on a Thursday, which didn't make much sense to me, standing there in my dancing shoes and feeling like a fool.

Gabriel gave me a sheepish smile, and returned to – whatever it was he was working on. Ray seemed absolutely delighted to see me, and made such a big show of it that I didn't really feel like I could just turn around and leave. I asked him if he'd got my email and he nodded emphatically as he ushered me over to my table, but didn't elaborate.

Bill gave me a slightly pained smile, but when I asked if he was alright, he just shrugged, and told me he couldn't complain.

There was no sign of Mary. They still haven't found her.

So I started to work. Ray told us the lesson was 'faces.' I put my hand up to say that sculpting faces was probably a bit advanced for where we were in the course, but he shook his head, and said that we were… a lot more talented than we thought. He said the key was that faces were twisted. All faces were twisted on the inside, and all you had to do was reach into the deepest part of yourself and put that twisted on the outside of the clay, and as soon as you

can scream you'll have your own face staring back at you.

I asked him to clarify, and he nodded again. "Soon as you can scream," he said, glancing over nervously to Gabriel, who gave him… big thumbs up. Like it was all some joke they were playing. It didn't feel like a joke, let me tell you.

I did my best, prodding and shaping the clay, trying to do a face, a-and I think I actually made a pretty good stab at it, given how unhelpful our instructions had been. I mean it had two eyes, a mouth, something that might – charitably been called hair. I asked Ray for his expertise, but he was just standing at the front of the room, smiling and nodding.

The face Bill was working on looked like Mary, though he'd made her mouth much, much too wide. Be honest, it gave me quite a shock to see. Then I heard that – shuffling sound from the other side of the room, and I knew that *Gabriel* was walking towards me, no doubt holding some unpleasant new shape he'd formed just for me. He coughed gently, and, well, I suppose it would have been rude not to look.

The structure he held in his hands made my eyes hurt. Thin, sharp lines angling off from each other in an incredibly intricate arrangement, although they never seemed to actually connect with each other. It shifted, just like the other one, and I felt something jabbing at my skull like a migraine. Finally the lines seemed to resolve into a clear shape: A door. "Perfect!" Gabriel told me. "It looks just like him!"

I asked him if it was supposed to be a face and he told me yes. It was a good friend of his. I asked him who and he said they didn't have a name. I told him everyone has a name, and he said his friend wasn't like us, that having a name would only confuse them. My head was pounding. I looked over at Ray, still nodding and smiling. And then over at Bill, who was steadily shoveling fistfuls of the clay Mary into his mouth. I don't remember anything more of that lesson.

The last lesson was on Monday. It wasn't watercolours, and never had been, according to the schedule I had been obsessively checking so much that Rosa had started to get worried. The room was larger than I'd remembered, although it didn't need to be, because there weren't any tables. *(at increasing speed)* Ray was there at the front, but he was singing something in a high tenor that I couldn't make out. I tried to ask him what we were doing for the lesson, but he just sang, louder. Bill was there, but he was made of clay his limbs being worked and twisted by Gabriel into strange, spiraling shapes, and occasionally joined into new and impossible positions.

As soon as Gabriel spotted me he hopped up and hurried over to me. He grabbed my had in a firm, damp grip, and started to thank me. I was the best assistant he could have asked for, he said. He'd improved so much because of me. As he said this, the structure beneath his face shifted, pushing it further and further from where his skull should have been. And behind his teeth at the edges of his eyes, I saw the dull red of shifting clay. His smile kept getting wider

and bending in on itself at the edges, and where his fingers touched the back of my trembling hand, I could feel his spiraling fingerprints start to turn. Round and around.

The marks won't come off, no matter how hard I scrub.

That was when I ran. I suppose I could have run before then, but I wouldn't have wanted to seem rude, and it's not like any of it could have been real, could it. It was just me losing it a bit. It has to have been, I mean I've seen Ray and Bill around since.

Certainly they don't like to make eye contact, and Bill cries a lot in church, but – they're still *here*. They're fine. So it didn't happen. There's no reason for me to stay away from the community center. There's no reason for me to sit inside all evening, trying not to look to closely at any of the doors.

I got a letter, a week ago. It was from Gabriel. It said that he had found a new job, and he'd love it if I came up to assist him again. He's working in a place called Sannikov Land. I looked it up. It doesn't exist. And it sounds cold. I don't think I should go. I'm not going to go.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

(sigh) 'The-Worker-In-Clay.' That's what Michael called him in his statement. A Great Twisting, that Gertrude stopped at the cost of a single life. *(hm)* I thought moving away from my humanity would

have made that seem more acceptable. That sort of sacrifice… But it just makes me sad. I remembered Gertrude's notebook. We found it alongside the plastic explosives, but it rather got lost amongst the business of… *(sigh)* saving the world at the cost of two lives.

It – it's borderline incomprehensible. Not because of any code, or cipher; there's every chance I could read those. Just simply because most of it *is* numbers or fragments of sentences that would no doubt mean something to her, but, well, not to me.

I've been staring at it for hours, in the hopes something from it would just – come to me. And it worked well enough to point me towards this statement, which is… useful background, and perhaps gives some insight into how Gertrude formulated her counter-rituals, but – not much more.

I've been trying to check on Melanie's condition. She refuses to see me – understandably, I,I suppose, and Basira has been looking after her. *(sigh)* It hurts, of course. But… *(sigh)* I really hope getting that bullet out of her helps. At least stops it from getting any worse. I can't have been too late again.

[Silence.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

(dry hm) There was a tape recorder waiting for me when I sat down. They're not even hiding it anymore. There weren't any tapes from when I was – away. I checked. *(long breath)* Whatever they

are, they are here for me. I suppose I should be worried, but I have *so* much to keep watch over. So I've decided to let the tapes run. They've – proved useful before, so… *(pause)*

I did do a small bit of follow-up on Debra Madaki. Just for my own curiosity. She didn't go to Sannikov Land in the end. I don't know, however, whether that was because she decided not to… or because shortly after this statement was given, they found the body of one Mary Randall in her basement, and she has spent the last nine years in Eastwood Park prison, where she remains to this day.

I can't find any – evidence related to the condition of the body. But I can imagine what a sculptor's apprentice might be capable of. Even an unwilling one.

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

End recording.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. ?????]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Some quiet breaths and sighing over a pretty steady stream of typing.]

MARTIN

(clicking something) Oh. Hello. Haven't seen you in a while.

[He continues with his work for a bit, before stopping again:]

MARTIN *(CONT'D)*

Really? I mean, it's just admin. I-it's not exactly *thrilling* listening.

[We hear a clock ticking steadily in the background.]

MARTIN *(CONT'D)*

(back to work; more clicking) Alright, fine. Whatever; you do you. Spool away, I guess. *(little laugh)* Let me know if you need some more batteries or something.

(short sigh, more typing) It's because he's back, isn't it. *(click)* He's back, so now you're going to be – around, again. Listening in. *(click, double-click) (amused *hm*)* You missed him, didn't you? *(same little laugh)* Yeah. Yeah, me too.

[At these last words, we hear the trademark static of Peter Lukas appear and steadily increase in volume.]

PETER

Which isn't a great sign, if I'm being completely honest.

[At the sound of his voice, Martin startles, then sighs once he's realized who it is.]

PETER *(CONT'D)*

You talked to him?

MARTIN

I – I tried not to; I-I-I didn't mean to –

PETER

(I'm not mad I'm just disappointed) You talked to him. And that's understandable, Martin, of course it is; *please* don't think I'm upset; it's just – not ideal. Shows how much work we still have ahead of us.

MARTIN

If I keep avoiding him, people *will* get suspicious.

PETER

(laughing) They're already suspicious, Martin. And that's not the problem. I had – hoped that all this time apart would have given you the space you needed, but…

MARTIN

You said he'd probably never wake up.

PETER

And he beat the odds. Which is *good!* But it does make things more complicated. It doesn't actually change, anything.

MARTIN

(indignant) A-a simple 'hello' isn't going to make any difference to –

PETER

We've been over this. The sort of power you're going to need relies on your –

MARTIN

(bitter) Obedience.

PETER

Isolation. It needs to be you, Martin. You're the only one who could possibly balance between the two.

MARTIN

But if I could *just* explain –

PETER

And how do you think John's going to react to that explanation,

hm? You think he'll accept it calmly? Come through with a well-considered, rational response?

MARTIN

That's not fair.

PETER

Or would he assume he knows better than you and do something rash?

[The clocks ticks on in the background of the ensuing pause.]

MARTIN

I don't *like* being *manipulated.*

PETER

That's fair. But I'm not wrong.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

No.

PETER

Martin. This isn't how any of us wanted it to go. But here we are, and if we don't pull this off, it's over for *everyone*. John included.

MARTIN

Yeah – you've said. *(sigh)*

MARTIN *(CONT'D)*

But if things are really so urgent, then why didn't Elias say anything.

[Peter chuckles, but it's got an edge to it.]

PETER

Because behind all his bluster, Elias is just like all the rest. He's so preoccupied playing the game, he doesn't pay attention to the big picture. He managed to convince himself that he could get his ritual off first, which would have made all of this a bit – moot, but that's not really an option anymore. So it's down to us. You and me, the dynamic duo!

MARTIN

And so, what, that means I have to trust you?

PETER

It would make things a lot simpler.

MARTIN

Yeah, well, things would also be a lot simpler if you weren't so cryptic about *everything!*

PETER

Well, if your Archives were a bit better-organized, it wouldn't have taken me almost three months to find the evidence *you* needed.

MARTIN

What?

PETER

I'm just saying that we'd all be better off if your Archivist actually knew how to archive.

MARTIN

(enough) Peter.

[Pause.]

PETER

…Yes. Well. *(pause)*

PETER *(CONT'D)*

Unless I'm mistaken, I believe I've unearthed a few of Dekker's old statements. Of course, I still need to do a bit of verification, but I'm confident they should provide you with all the context you need.

MARTIN

Good.

PETER

Great!

[Pause.]

MARTIN

When all this is over, I'm telling him everything, with or without your permission.

PETER

Martin, when it's over, you won't want to.

[Martin lets out a contemplative noise.]

PETER ***(CONT'D)***

But he *will* be safe. They all will.

MARTIN

Yeah.

[Silence.]

PETER

Anyway, I'm *very* excited to see this rota you've put together.

MARTIN

(overlapping) Oh – oh, okay.

PETER

Never had much of a gift for administration myself – too many variables. Now, this box on the left, that's the library stuff, yes?

MARTIN

Wh– n,no! That's the – Those are the *dates*! I – *(clicking)* Look, are you sure you don't want me to teach you; i-it's a *very* simple program –

PETER

No, no. Can't stand computers. Besides, that's why I have an assistant, isn't it?

MARTIN

(sighing) Yeah. I guess so.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG127 – Remains to be Seen

Statement #8312111

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, ARCHIVIST'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Dr. Jonathan Fanshawe regarding the months leading up to the death and autopsy of Albrecht von Closen. Original statement given as part of a letter to Jonah Magnus, November 21st, 1831. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Jonah. I must first and foremost decline your generous offer of a medical position servicing Millbank Penitentiary. While the terms you have laid out are, no doubt, more than adequate, I have for these last months come to the unfortunate conclusion that our intimacy and friendship must cease immediately. I do not know what interest you have in the poor condemned souls within those walls, nor do I care to guess. In the light of what I have so recently witnessed, I can no longer in good conscience associate with any of

your endeavors. Nor will I continue to collect or provide those accounts of the esoteric and otherworldly that you and your… Institute so eagerly require. Consider this the severing of our acquaintance.

This cannot come as a shock to you. Surely you must have understood what you were asking when you implored me to visit with Albrecht, and apply my meager skills to the illness that beset him. You must have known the nature of that illness, even if only in the most general terms, and no doubt you had some intuition as to its cause.

But, should all this be a true surprise to you, then I shall do my best to explain, and hope that any revelations contained here in me sway you from the path you have started upon.

I arrived at Albrecht's estate early in April. The trees were dense with renewed greenery, and the rain drummed heavily on the carriages as we approached. I remember it so clearly. The smell of the rain cut through with an unexpected whiff of smoke, and as we got closer I saw the orange glow of flame through the trees.

My first thought was that the house had caught fire, and I would arrive only to a scorched ruin and blackened bone, but as we got closer I could see that it was a single tree that was burning. A gnarled and ancient elm, that sat removed from the rest of the forest. A small crowd surrounded the spectacle. One man, who I took to be a groundskeeper, stood closer than the others, with a lit torch in his hand.

On my instruction, the driver pulled closer, though the horses were nervous, and I asked the man why they were burning the tree, when the rain was coming down so heavily. Surely it could have waited for drier weather. The man simply shrugged. My German is… fine, though I have had little cause to use it of late, but his accent was thick, and all that I could get from him was a sense of… resignation, and the insistence that his master, who I took to be Albrecht, wanted the tree dead. I'm sure that he used that word, though. Not burned, not removed, or destroyed. Dead. I resolved to ask Albrecht about it when I saw him.

As it transpired, that was sometime later than I had anticipated. As I'm sure you're aware, Albrecht's wife Carla was taken by a fever some years ago, and his sons were away at school, so it was the housekeeper who greeted me when I arrived. Greta, her name was, a pleasant, red-faced young woman with a smattering of English that she insisted on using at every opportunity.

Once I had dressed in dry clothes, she brought some food and a drop of brandy, all the while making apologies that the master of the house was indisposed. I *did* tell her that I was a doctor, and specifically visiting in order to help end any indisposition. But she just shook her head and told me he'd see me when he was ready.

The house seemed.. so empty. The rain battered on the window, and the clocks ticked away in every room, but there seemed no sound of life to be found anywhere. As I sat in the drawing room, I realized Greta had left the door behind me open to the corridor beyond. I tried to ignore it, simply drink my brandy and continue

waiting.

But I could not ignore the sensation that someone was out there, watching behind me. The corridor was dark, and I thought for a second I could make out a shape, crouched there. But there was nothing, so I closed the door. Eventually evening came, and Greta informed me that dinner was served. I ate alone, sat in a long dining hall that seemed to have far too many windows. Turning behind me, I saw Greta watching me from the doorway. Her face held nothing of malice in it that I could discern, but still I was uneasy. I called, trying to dismiss her, but she didn't seem to hear me.

I retired back to the drawing room to smoke my pipe, but even that simple, reassuring action brought me no comfort, and I made my way to the room I had been given without ever once having seen my elusive host. I noted that the window looking over my bed had neither blind nor shutter, and I was all at once very aware of my candle, and the sickly illumination it spread over everything, the point of light reflected back in the glass like the glint of an eye.

I did not sleep well that night. The feeling of being under-observation did not lessen, and I remained unsure of the exact nature of this errand, an errand, I remind you, Jonah, I undertook at your insistence. Eventually a fitful sleep found me, and I had some measure of peace.

It was still dark when I awoke, and that feeling had intensified to a terrifying measure. I was now certain that something was in the

room with me, staring at me. I reached over and took a match, striking it against the bedpost. And there, looming over me, was a face, pale and shaking. The eyes sunken, and the cheeks were dirty and unshaved.

It was the face of Albrecht von Closen.

In the light, his eyes met mine, and his mouth began to work furiously, repeating the same phrase over and over, increasing in volume until he was screaming it into my face: *(breath)*

"Leg sie alle zurück. Leg sie alle zurück."

Put them back. Put them *back*.

I felt a sharp pain in my fingers as the match burned down, and I dropped it with a cry. The room disappeared into darkness once again, and when my scrabbling hands had gotten another lit, he was gone. And I was alone. I did not sleep any further that night.

When the sun finally crept through my uncovered window, I dressed quickly. Greta's pleas that I come down for breakfast were roundly ignored, and I started throwing open any door I had not yet seen behind, looking for my host.

I found him in the library, where a fire already blazed in a feeble attempt to keep the morning chill at bay. He stood in front of it, eyes lost in the flame, looking every bit as feeble and warm as he had when he crouched over my bed the night before. I shut the door behind me before Greta could object, and demanded to know

why he had come into my room.

He… apologized, in such a pitiful tone that the anger seemed to abandon me all at once. He seemed so small. He gestured for me to take a seat, and I did. As he walked the shelves, stroking the spines of each book in turn, I started to ask him about his health, and explained why I was there, but he showed not the slightest sign that he was listening.

“I had them rebound last year,” he said. “Damp can do terrible things to a book.” I told him I was certain that that was the case, but I must insist we talk about his health. Again he ignored me. Instead, he took the seat opposite me and started to tell me a story. And then another. And another. A stream of strange tales began to pour out of him, and I just sat there, transfixed, desperately wishing I had the strength of will to leave, but all I could do was listen.

He told me of a seamstress, who laced her body with fine black thread, and when she pulled it all out in a single swift motion, her skin dropped away like a loose shift. He told me of a man so scared to die he spent a year weaving a rope blindfolded, so he would not know the length, and could not foresee the moment it would tighten around his neck when he finally threw himself into the void. He told me of a fire that burns so hot and fierce that to even know about it is enough to burn a man’s tongue from his head. He told me so many terrible things.

And at the end of it all, the only thing I could think to ask him was where he read them. My eyes darted to the books that surrounded

us, but Albrecht laughed at this, and placed his hands across a spine that was simply labeled ‘A Warning.’ For a moment, he looked as though he were about to wrench it from its place and hurl it into the fire. But it passed. He turned back to me. “You do not understand,” he said to me in German. *“I* do not read the books. They read me.”

I did not ask him to clarify further. I got the key to my room from Greta and made sure this time, the door was locked as I slept.

As my stay progressed, I learned more of his condition. I would have initially described it as a… natural mania, that had found a totemic focus on the books of his library. But when he finally told me the story of how he discovered them… and the awful tomb from which they were retrieved, I began to suspect that perhaps the books had brought some contaminant into Albrecht’s home, which had gradually corroded his mind. I had neither the time nor equipment to conduct the sort of tests that might have confirmed such things, but I became convinced that removing the books would go some way to addressing his health concerns.

I expected some stiff resistance on the subject, but Albrecht’s response seemed closer to relief than any sort of distress. He simply asked if I would help, and, to my eternal regret, I agreed.

What shall I tell you, Jonah, about this… fool’s errand? That damnable journey we embarked upon? Shall I regale you with the awful experiences of transporting a library’s worth of books through the Black Forest? Perhaps I should write you an account of finding

that ancient cemetery, of descending into that bleak and frozen mausoleum. Or would you prefer to hear about the hours we spent placing volume after volume on empty grey shelves, ignoring how out of place the new bindings appeared against the antique stonework?

No. I'm sure all you want to know was how Albrecht died. Why it was that, as I replaced the last book taken from that place, I heard his – scream from the top of the stairs and ran up to find him sprawled and *dead* before the stone coffin. But I cannot answer that. I do not know how he died. I saw nothing and no one with him, and his body seemed whole and undamaged. But I do have some idea as to *why* it happened.

For as I filled those dead shelves with freshly bound volumes, I could not help but notice that every page was blank. I have since checked with *[Paines]*, who I believe to be your preferred book-binders. And I know that the books poor Albrecht was returning to the grave were not the books that were taken. I hope they bring you much wisdom, Jonah, for the cost was dear enough.

Nothing stood in the way of my retreat, and I dragged Albrecht's body back as far as the coach. We left that awful place, and I have endeavored most acutely to forget the route.

Before he was buried, I was able to secure permission to do an autopsy. I had some thought as to discovering the cause of his sudden, violent passing. Do I need to tell you what I found, Jonah? Do I need to detail what covered his organs, his bones, the inside of

his skin? What clustered together in their dozens, and all turned as one to focus on me as I opened his chest, their pupils constricting in the light, with irises of every hue and color? Because whatever it was that did this to him, I know in my heart that it is your fault.

I have had the body burned. Please do not write to me again.

Your obedient servant,

Doctor Jonathan Fanshawe.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

(sigh) Disconcerting to find my namesake in a statement, especially one connected so directly to the Institute. I can only hope breaking faith with Jonah Magnus didn't go too badly for him.

Hm. Jonah Magnus. I've never really given much thought to him, not nearly as much as I should have. I suppose I had always hoped there was a chance he was… innocent in all this. I know, I know. But I had – *(sigh)* I just – hoped that maybe the founding of the Institute was in earnest, and not simply the foundation-stone for all the *terrible* things that have happened here. But no. Whatever is happening now has its origins two hundred years ago, in the work of an evil man. *(shaky breath)*

Exactly two hundred years in fact. Don't think that little detail has evaded me. I don't know the precise date the Institute was founded, but I do know that it was in 1818. *(shaky breath)* Something's

coming. I know it is. *(pause)* But I just – don't know what I need to do.

(sound of recognition) (calling)

Come in, Basira.

[The door opens and closes as Basira comes in.]

BASIRA

I was waiting for you to finish.

ARCHIVIST

I know.

BASIRA

I don't like that you've started doing that.

ARCHIVIST

I – I know. *(pause, sigh)* How's Melanie?

BASIRA

How do you think?

ARCHIVIST

Ah – I-I, uh, I should probably talk to –

BASIRA

(overlapping) You should probably stay as far away as possible. She doesn't want to see you.

ARCHIVIST

No. No, o-o-o-of course.

BASIRA

But, she did want me to… apologize.

ARCHIVIST

(soft, surprised) Oh.

BASIRA

From her, for… the shoulder.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. It, it's fine. Scalpel wounds – *(nonchalant laugh)* – they heal quickly.

BASIRA

Hm.

ARCHIVIST

(dry breath of a laugh) Too quickly, really.

[He gives another of those same laughs.]

BASIRA

Already?

ARCHIVIST

(long sigh) Just another scar for the collection.

BASIRA

Hm.

ARCHIVIST

D-Do you think it worked; is she…?

BASIRA

I don't know. She seems more… coherent, I guess? And you did get an apology.

ARCHIVIST

(quiet) Yeah.

BASIRA

She says she can cry now, which is, um –

ARCHIVIST

(even quieter) Oh.

BASIRA

– progress? I think?

ARCHIVIST

Uh –

BASIRA

She's still angry, but she hasn't attacked anyone. Not even sure she has it in her anymore.

ARCHIVIST

Well that's – that's good.

BASIRA

(ehhhh) Mm.

[The Archivist sighs.]

BASIRA

So. You can't be killed by a collapsing building. Major injuries scar fast. You can force the truth out of people, and knowledge pops into your head whenever you need it.

ARCHIVIST

Yes. I, I think that, that about covers it.

BASIRA

…And what was that you were doing yesterday?

ARCHIVIST

…When?

BASIRA

You were sat on the floor for like four hours.

ARCHIVIST

…Oh! Uh, no, I,I,I was – I was – listening, you know, trying to see if the statements *(inhale)* …called to me.

BASIRA

And?

[We hear the flip of pages as the Archivist indicates the Fanshawe statement.]

BASIRA

Brilliant.

[The Archivist puts the statement down; we note at this point that there is some static that has just come in.]

ARCHIVIST

Look, I don't know, Basira. I hope I'm still human, but it – *(sigh)* But it's seeming more and more unlikely.

BASIRA

I didn't ask.

ARCHIVIST

No, I suppose you didn't.

BASIRA

Don't snoop in my head.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not *snooping;* I'm not looking; that's not how this works!

BASIRA

Explain it, then.

ARCHIVIST

I,I'm not sure I *can*!

BASIRA

Humor me.

[The Archivist lets out a *long* sigh.]

ARCHIVIST

It's – hard. It's like there's a, a door, in my mind. A-a-and behind it is, is the entire ocean.

ARCHIVIST

Before, I didn't notice it, but now, I – I know it's there, and I can't forget it, and I can *feel* the pressure of the water on it. I – I – *[unintelligible noise]* – I can keep it closed? *(sigh)* But sometimes, when I'm around p-people, or.. places, or.. ideas? A drop or two will push through the cracks at the edges of the door. And I'll… know something.

[Pause.]

BASIRA

What happens if you open the door?

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

I drown.

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, Basira, I,I *will* try to keep anything I've learned about you to myself. And my priorities haven't changed. I hope you can believe that. *(shaky breath and sigh)* I'm still on your side. You can trust me.

BASIRA

(tired exhale) Yeah. People keep saying that.

ARCHIVIST

Do they? Who – who – who else – did Martin say something?

BASIRA

(brief pause) It was a few months back, after the attack. He'd started spending time with Lukas.

[The Archivist sighs.]

BASIRA

At least, he said he was. And I wanted answers.

BASIRA

He kept telling me to trust him, to hear the guy out, even though he still wouldn't actually show his face. I told him he could drop me an email or vanish me.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

BASIRA

Honestly, I kind of regret not just – grabbing Martin and shaking an explanation out of him. But I didn't want to push it. He was in a – bad place, what with the attack and his mum and everything. Now I try and bring it up and he just – disappears. Nothing to be done.

ARCHIVIST

S-sorry, you said – what happened with his mother?

BASIRA

Oh, yeah. She died. About two months after you, uh…

ARCHIVIST

(in the background, quiet) Oh.

BASIRA

(pause) Martin was… He tried to stay strong, keep it together, but – that sort of thing… *(sigh)* Then those Flesh things burst in, and well – here we are.

ARCHIVIST

God.

BASIRA

He didn't tell you?

ARCHIVIST

(surprised) No.

BASIRA

Hm. Guess you don't know everything then.

ARCHIVIST

N-no, I,I guess not. *(shaky breath and sigh)* So what do we do now?

BASIRA

You tell me. Just don't expect much on trust these days.

ARCHIVIST

(hm) Yes, I, I suppose that's fair.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. PRISON, VISITING ROOM]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[We hear the sound of a door or two being unlocked, and then locked again. There's a bit of echoing background chatter.]

ELIAS

Good evening, Detective.

[Basira walks up to him.]

BASIRA

I'm not a detective.

ELIAS

Of course.

BASIRA

You wanted to see me?

ELIAS

Yes.

BASIRA

Something too important to tell the Inspector?

ELIAS

Maybe I – just wanted to have a chat.

BASIRA

Well, good luck with that.

[She starts walking back, begins to unlock what sounds like a grated door.]

ELIAS

I – found one of these in my cell.

[Basira pauses.]

ELIAS

(continuous) It wasn't recording, but I assume this means he's awake.

[Elias's handcuffs clink.]

ELIAS

Basira?

[Clink again.]

BASIRA

Can we cut the bullshit?

ELIAS

What "bullshit" might that be?

BASIRA

The part where you pretend you don't spend your whole time watching us.

[Someone yells something in the background.]

ELIAS

Sometimes I'm eating.

BASIRA

You know he's back. You've seen him.

ELIAS

Fine. Yes. ##### [Another clink.]

[Pause.]

BASIRA

So what's with the recorder? Who gave it to you?

ELIAS

(handcuffs clink again, nonchalant) Oh, no. That – that really did just appear in my cell.

BASIRA

Right, so, what, you figured you could just record us for him? Serve some distrust from afar?

ELIAS

Our *arrangement* with the inspector notwithstanding, I rather feel that right now all the distrust is *very* much your own. And, as to whether he'll ever hear this, maybe he'll get the tapes, maybe he won't, but the recordings have helped so far, so…

BASIRA

Do you know what they are?

ELIAS

What a question.

[Basira sighs.]

BASIRA

Fine. So you won't see him, but you're happy for him to hear our conversations.

ELIAS

He can listen all he wants, but he's at a very delicate stage right now, and I fear my *presence* would be a, um, a *distraction*.

[Clink.]

ELIAS

I made it clear my cooperation is contingent on his not seeing me, and my terms have been accepted thus far.

BASIRA

So why am I here? What do you want that's *so* important you needed to tell me to my face?

ELIAS

I believe you recently lost Melanie.

BASIRA

We *saved* Melanie.

ELIAS

As a person, yes, but as a defender… *(he tsk-sighs)* I would have thought you would want all the help you could get, or have you forgotten what happened the last time you let your guard down?

BASIRA

We'll work it out.

ELIAS

(heh) Possibly. Then again, you are beset by enemies on all sides, Basira. And, unless you expect John to *record* them into submission, it would seem you are in rather dire need of another option.

BASIRA

And you just happen to have one.

ELIAS

I might have an idea, *(clink)* yes.

BASIRA

And what does it cost?

ELIAS

Just some of your time, Basira. Just your time.

[Pause.]

BASIRA

(letting out a long sigh) Okay. Let's hear it.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG128 – Heavy Goods

Statement #0180303

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Some papers rustle.]

BREEKON

(low, dark) Don't say a word.

[More rustling. The door opens, and the Archivist comes in.]

BASIRA

John. Don't turn on the light. Go get Melanie, quickly.

ARCHIVIST

It's alright, Basira, I know he's here.

BASIRA

So what are you doing?

ARCHIVIST

I imagine he's here to deliver something. Thought it might need *signing* for.

BREEKON

That's right. Just wanted to – to drop off a package.

BASIRA

Right, look, what the *hell* is this? Did you bring him here?

ARCHIVIST

No.

BASIRA

Is he here for revenge?

ARCHIVIST

I don't – I don't know. Ask him.

BASIRA

Like he's going to answer *me*.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. *(inhale)*

(to Breekon) Are you here for revenge?

[As he asks the question, a static builds in the background;

this is compulsion in effect.]

BREEKON

(heh) Yeah. Just like when we.. when *I* fed the copper to the pit.

[Basira bristles with an incensed breath.]

ARCHIVIST

Easy, Basira.

[The static gets stronger. A low rumbling begins to accompany it.]

ARCHIVIST

What pit.

BREEKON

In here.

[He knocks twice against Breekon and Hope's trademark coffin.]

BREEKON

Realized I'm not tied – to it anymore. Not on my own. Thought you could have it. Pay your respects like –

BASIRA

Daisy's in there.

BREEKON

That's its name? Then sure, 't's in there, whatever's *left*. Find out if you like.

ARCHIVIST

Would you *please* drop that *ridiculous* voice?

BREEKON

(terrible Russian accent) Apologies. Is preferred like so?

ARCHIVIST

Christ, that's worse.

[Breekon laughs, still in the "accent."]

ARCHIVIST

(with compulsion) What is your real voice?

[Breekon laughs again, back to the original voice, though not as darkly intoned.]

BREEKON

Nikola said you were funny. Didn't believe it.

BASIRA

What do you want? Why are you here?

[Silence. The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

(with compulsion) Why are you *here?*

BREEKON

Dunno.

(pause) 'S not right, on my own. Not right. No point in doing it on my own. Don't know what happens now. *(pause)* Thought I might kill you. Missed my chance. Thought I might just deliver something. So here's a coffin.

[He slides the coffin closer.]

In case you want – to join your friend.

[Basira takes a breath.]

BASIRA

Get out.

ARCHIVIST

Basira.

[Static is building in the background; there's a strange rustling sort of sound.]

BASIRA

Get. Out.

BREEKON

Make me.

[And all at once there's a strange sound, musical yet hollow, and it seems to be building to –]

ARCHIVIST

Stop.

[There's a new static layered on top, now, high-pitched – like feedback from microphones too close to each other, but angelic, somehow.]

BREEKON

What're you doing?

[No answer. The strange new static combination continues; whatever's happening, we have no clues as to its nature.]

BASIRA

John, what are you doing?

BREEKON

What are you – stop it.

[The static becomes more intense.]

BREEKON

Stop it!

[When the Archivist speaks, it has an echo to it, reminiscent of the hollowness from earlier:]

ARCHIVIST

No.

[He says nothing further, but Breekon begins to make an uncomfortable, almost choking sound.]

BREEKON

E-Enough – stop – *looking* at me –

[The static – from rumbling to regular static to feedback – grows even stronger. Breekon makes more gurgling/choking sounds, and then begins to yell, but almost immediately after he begins, his voice begins to fade. His scream is still clearly at high intensity; it's more as if someone took the knob controlling his volume and turned it down mid-yell.]

[Something makes a knocking or banging sort of sound as this happens; it's possible that Breekon has been pushed out the door.]

[The static continues, and then the Archivist lets out a soft gasp and begins breathing hard, as if needing air.]

[He takes one final, steadying breath, after which the static begins to fade.]

BASIRA

John?

ARCHIVIST

(quickly) It's fine. *(more himself)* Get me a pen. Please.

[He takes a shaky breath.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The Archivist takes a deep, steadying breath.]

ARCHIVIST

(clearing his throat) Mm – Statement of the surviving half of the being calling itself 'Breekon and Hope' regarding its… existence. Statement… *extracted* from subject, 3rd March, 2018. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

We started in a plague. Not like the nasty crawlers, but like bringing any other doom. We had a cart of corpses, faces twisted, screaming, leaking pus. Knock on doors and cry roughly to bring their dead to us. I tended the shrunken, mangy mule, and he took the remains on shoulder, slinging them onto the stinking pile.

I remember it clear. The fear on their faces as we rolled towards their hovels. Mud-caked peasant or bloated lord, every one of them saw us coming and trembled. It wasn't the plague they feared; it wasn't the death that waited in our wagon. It was us. Two strangers rolling towards them, unstoppable and uncertain, wearing faces they would only half-remember, bringing a fate they would beg their god to forget. They could not hate us, anymore than they

could hate the rock that falls on them from a crumbling cliff. They did not know us, but they knew what we might do to them. What we might *bring* them.

And we did. Villages that might have no bodies for us when we arrived would pile high our cart before we left. We did not *kill* them, did not lift a finger. We were the bringers of their awful fate, not its executors. They knew this and feared us in kind. And we drank it down, the taste of it sweeter than the food that now rotted on our plates or the drink that curdled in our cups. And we both tasted it together.

When we left our destination, the mule whining at the new weight behind it, he would reach behind us and find a face, sagging, sloughing off its skull, and pull it to him. He'd place it over the one he wore already and he would laugh and laugh and laugh. Sometimes it fell off. Sometimes it stayed for weeks. I kept the face we chose, but I loved him for our levity. And the corpses piled ever higher.

We served aboard the Robert Small, bodies of the time crammed into uniform as sloppily as anyone would expect. Enlistment wasn't needed, nor was drafting. We were on the list for any crew that deserved us. And we were fitting deckhands for the Robert Small, as it made its slow and mournful passage to Australia. The quartermaster was too precise, though, and in counting out the rations saw us for what we were. I ate the quartermaster's pen. He ate the quartermaster's tongue. And that was that.

The journey was magnificent. No waiting, no searching for a delivery. Every moment moved us *towards*, towards the completion of the task and the culmination of our charge's terror. Poor wretches who emerged from Millbank, with tales of Australia and its cruelties on their lips, bundled into the cramped and creaking ship that would drag them away from everything they loved. And towards everything they feared.

That was the first time we saw what would become this place: The Eye's Pedestal. But we were drunk on the dawning horror of transportation and took no heed of it.

A young man named Jack tried to leap overboard. When he caught the lad, there was such begging and pleading as you've never heard, just to let them drown, allow the sea to take its due. But *he* just laughed and laughed, and Jack died on land as he had always been meant to.

We were conductors on a train, prim suits and scowls, a relentless beast of iron and steam that never seemed to get you exactly where you wanted to be unless there was something dreadful waiting for you. We punched tickets, ignored questions, and threw off those who looked like they were having too fine a time of it. We didn't like this job, too many sat aboard dreaming sweetly of progress and the future, too few alive to the truth of dirt and struggle in front of them. We woke those we could, but too many stepped off with a smile.

We had some luggage, once, a thrumming silk-wrapped thing of the

spider, hiding away in an old steamer trunk. We stepped heavy through the dining car and found an old woman near the caboose. “Something strange in the luggage car,” he said, and I finished as was our way – “You should come and see it.” She stood and walked with us readily enough, though tears flowed silent down her cheeks and pattered onto the fading carpet.

The Spider’s always an easy job, no fuss, no complications, everything planned and prepared. It knows too much to truly be a stranger, but hides its knowing well enough to endure. We knew she wouldn’t scream as she was hollowed out and drunk, but still he thought best to cover the sounds with a laugh. He was always our humor. *(pause)* I remember our first automobile, black and reliable, just about presentable for the London auction-houses we served. He squeezed its first owner until they stopped, and dumped them in a river, and I stayed with the second until they didn’t know who they were, anymore than they knew what they were.

And then we had a car. It was noisy, and it juddered, but the name on the wooden siding was respectable, and now it was ours and good enough for Sotheby’s. We moved a lot of things in those years. Some of them even harmless. My favorite was the old knife, rusted from the trenches and lied about by a barking auctioneer. We delivered it to a leering banker who knew the second they saw us what they’d done.

Sweat dripped from under their bowler hat as they took the knife from its dented metal case and *screamed.* They lunged at me, stabbing me over and through, then moved on to him, but he just

laughed as the blade went in and out and no blood flowed from the holes they cut. And when the banker had screamed all the curses they had learned from German gas attacks, the knife turned back again and cut them, piece by piece. We delivered it back to Christie's, and that was the end of the auction jobs.

Then were the good times, the circus times. We always take what jobs are before us, deliver whatever will bring that fear and misery, but there is no joy in carrying *meat,* in shifting writhing spiral things. But with the circus, we were among our own kind at last. They all had names, true enough, but none would dare pretend that names were real. Faces changed more often than clothes, and nobody truly knew who anybody was, save for their function within the show. We carried and lifted and helped the circus move towards its next destination, the next doomed town. Sometimes we joined the show, lifting weights and things that looked like animals. Sometimes we lifted members of the audience. Sometimes we even put them down again.

Even in our stillness, people were afraid. The winter in Russia was cold, and in the icy air, the absence of our breath was clear for all to see. I could taste their discomfort. But none ever mentioned it. We didn't like the puppet, when Orsinov began to carve it. It seemed wrong to us to try and bring one like us about, to create or remake it in such a solid, static shape.

We were wrong, of course, and when Orsinov carved into the thing that had once called itself Grimaldi, and fed the pieces they didn't need to the shuddering organist, even we found ourselves

impressed. And when the faceless puppet peeled its creator and moved itself with their tendon strings, he looked at me and laughed and laughed.

We followed her a while, but she was unpredictable, while we are things of point and purpose. When she lost the ancient skin, we went our separate ways, and found ourselves a lorry, long and dirty-grey. We drove the motorways and country roads, and took great crates of nothing to and fro, driving towards a different sort of terror. It wasn't our cargo that brought fear, then. We brought fear to our cargo. Smiling, waiting patiently by the road, with cardboard signs of gentle hopes. In they went to the back, that silent heavy place, with boxes that seemed too big or too warm. They usually screamed as we drove and drove, fear thick in the air, and sometimes they died.

Some tried to leap from the back into the road, and one even made it through. Most stayed, getting weaker and weaker, their cries fading away as hunger and thirst and despair took their final hold. But we were not content. He didn't laugh like he used to, driving aimless, waiting for the call sat badly with us, who were meant to know our destination. We were meant to have a cargo and an address, so it was we found a man named Breekon, and took everything they were until there was nothing left but the sweet taste of a broken soul's disquiet and confusion.

We took the van and started to deliver once again. But we were reckless, desperate for the surety we had not felt since leaving the circus. And so we took the casket, a hungry thing of the earth, a

crushing, choking tomb that will not let you die because it is too much what it is for death to find you there, within its mocking shape, buried alive.

It was one like us that found it, a thing of shifting names and deja-vu. A fool, that believed because it found the coffin in chains, it would be an easy thing to control, to bargain with. But there was no remorse when the test finally failed, and it fed on the thing that considered itself the master. No face to change in the cold, dark earth, no eye to fool where it is now.

But there was no mention of us in the deal, no thought to what might happen should a victim pass the test. And what happened was: we were stuck with it. It was still our cargo, nowhere to take it, no address or destination. So back in the van it went.

A long time we've carried it, keeping it as close as it wants, not listening to it sing in the rain. Even when the mannequin that now called itself Orsinov came back to us, told us we could help the world unknow and fear again the coming of strangers, still we had to drag it with us, an unclaimed package.

But I suppose it was worth it, in the end. When that Hunter killed him, when she took her violence of mindless instinct and unleashed it on us, it was there. It was waiting. I fed her to it. She took him from me, made *us* a me. And she doesn't get to die for that. She gets to live, trapped and helpless, and entombed forever. No prey, no hunt. No movement.

We failed, but I have at least that comfort. I am without him now. *I am.* I can feel myself fading, weak, no reason to move, nothing to deliver. But I am no longer tied to the casket, so you can have it. You can stare at it, knowing how your feral friend suffers, knowing how powerless you are to help. And when you can't bear it any longer, knowing that you can climb in, and join her. I have never known hate before. I have never known loss. But now they are with me always, and I desire nothing but to share them with you.

ARCHIVIST

(voice shaky) Statement.. ends.

[He collapses.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE, A BIT LATER]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The Archivist inhales.]

BASIRA

Here.

[She sets a cup down.]

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

[He picks up the cup.]

BASIRA

Was it worth it?

ARCHIVIST

I – I don’t know. Maybe?

BASIRA

Did you at least learn anything?

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

Daisy’s alive, in there.

BASIRA

Right.

ARCHIVIST

Basira, we – we can't [open –]

BASIRA

Yeah, I can *read.*

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

Right.

Short pause.

BASIRA

So why give it to us?

ARCHIVIST

I don't – I don't know. T-to taunt us? To *(inhale)* lure us in as well?

[He sighs.]

BASIRA

Hm.

ARCHIVIST

I-I saw that – thing's mind; it's lost on its own, no partner, no – purpose, I-I-I honestly think it just wanted to do another delivery.

BASIRA

And there's no chance more of the circus survived the explosion?

ARCHIVIST

I don't think so. I – at least – Breekon didn't think so.

[He sighs.]

BASIRA

Where does the coffin lead?

ARCHIVIST

The Buried.

BASIRA

Right.

[Silence.]

BASIRA

(inhale, set) Right. Keep it safe; I'll be gone a few days. I have some leads I need to follow up.

[We hear the rustling of her moving as she's speaking.]

ARCHIVIST

Sorry?

BASIRA

You **heard me**. Don't ask about them. And don't *know* about them either.

ARCHIVIST

Well, I can't exactly control *that.*

BASIRA

(cutting him off) **Learn.**

ARCHIVIST

(sighing) I'll do my best. *(breath)* You *can* trust me, Basira.

BASIRA

Stop saying that.

[Silence.]

BASIRA

Do you know how I survived that – the Unknowing?

ARCHIVIST

I… No. No I don't.

BASIRA

No powers, no… magic or *help*. I was trapped in that place, and so I tried to figure it out. And I did, a little. So I kept doing it. I kept going through until I got out, I… reasoned my way out of that nightmare.

ARCHIVIST

Good Lord.

BASIRA

Then everything ended and Daisy was gone. And you were gone. And Tim.

And then I got back to the Institute and Martin sent me to meet the new boss. Then I stood alone in an empty office for more than an hour.

I can trust me, John. That's it.

[The Archivist sighs.]

BASIRA

I'll try and be back in a week or two. Don't think about me.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

BASIRA

And *don't* open the coffin.

[The Archivist laughs dryly.]

ARCHIVIST

It *is* addressed to me.

(silence)

(somber) Yes, alright. Alright.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG129 – Submerged

Statement #0130409

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[A light thud, and some shuffling of pages, followed by the creaking of a door; someone is entering the room.]

ARCHIVIST

Martin?

MARTIN

Uh – John – how did you?…

ARCHIVIST

I just, ha– I know sometimes.

It's, It's a whole – thing.

[As he speaks, footsteps sound throughout the room.]

MARTIN

Oh. Okay. W-well, sorry, but I, I, um…

ARCHIVIST

You have to leave. Suddenly.

MARTIN

(almost to himself) Oh, *(normal)* John, come on, we've been over this –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) No, it's fine; I know you've got… *(big sigh)* Whatever this is, I'm not going to question you.

MARTIN

(swallowing) Thank you.

ARCHIVIST

Even if it looks like you're doing something *really stupid*.

[Pause.]

[A slight sigh, then:]

ARCHIVIST

Sorry.

MARTIN

It's okay.

(breath)

I get it; it's just –

ARCHIVIST

I worry. You're working for someone *(fumbles for words) really bad*.

MARTIN

Yes, I'm not an idiot, John, but – it's no worse than working for some*thing* really bad, so.

ARCHIVIST

At least the Eye hasn't gone after our own.

[Martin sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

Lukas has vanished two people –

MARTIN

Yeah, and if it wasn't for me, it would have been a lot more.

[Pause; Martin moves to leave.]

MARTIN

This isn't helping anything.

ARCHIVIST

I just – *(sigh)* I'm sorry; Basira's off doing – god knows what, and I can't talk to Melanie.

MARTIN

(yeah, whatever, okay) Mhm.

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

I suppo–

(he stops himself)

I miss you.

[Martin lets out a short laugh of disbelief.]

ARCHIVIST

I'm just –

MARTIN

Lonely.

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[A sniff.]

ARCHIVIST

I, uh – I heard about your mother.

MARTIN

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

I am – *so* sorry.

MARTIN

(slight hitch of breath) Thank you.

(drawn-out breath) It's -… It's better, this way.

ARCHIVIST

If, If you *do* need to talk, I –

MARTIN

I can't.

ARCHIVIST

No. No, o-o-of course. *(inhale)* Listen, Martin, you should know –

MARTIN

John…

ARCHIVIST

Daisy might be alive. Basira is –

MARTIN

(overlapping) Stop. Stop, please; I – I shouldn't *know* any of this, I –

[There's a strange sound here – it *could* be a low, rumbling static, but it could also be the sound of Martin gathering his things. The sound it most closely resembles is actually that of… another tape recorder running.]

MARTIN

I, I really need to go; I, I –

ARCHIVIST

Right. *(softer)* Right.

[The sound stops.]

MARTIN

Please stop finding me.

[He gets up to go.]

ARCHIVIST

What happened, Martin?

[Pause.]

MARTIN

You *died.*

ARCHIVIST

I came back.

MARTIN

Yeah –

[He opens the door.]

MARTIN

– and I'm not going to let it happen again.

ARCHIVIST

Wait – Wait, wh–

[The door closes. The Archivist exhales, then sighs.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Kulbir Shakya, regarding a flood that occurred around his house in Hackney. Original statement given September 4th, 2013. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

In many ways, I lost my home even before all this happened. I lived in that house my entire life. Hackney was my area, my community; it wasn't some fashionable postcode or investment opportunity.

I should have seen the signs, I suppose. Little independent coffee shops sprouting up like weeds between the paving stones. Micro-breweries and taprooms cropping up in old industrial estates. Even though the Prince of Wales had to close its doors because it couldn't afford the new business rights. The faces I knew and recognized gradually being outnumbered by young, trendy white people in artfully shabby clothes, who thought they were blending in… and precise-looking real-estate agents in well-pressed suits taking pictures of dilapidated buildings.

I complained, of course, made all the right noises of disapproval, but… I still drank the overpriced coffee. Still shopped at all the shiny new franchise outlets.

I thought because I'd been living there so long, I'd be alright. Hell, the house had been my grandfather's before he died. But, we never had the money to actually buy it, and as property values skyrocketed, the landlord who had always seemed so understanding… suddenly started itching to sell. And there was no way I could afford the new rent on the meager salary of my admin job. I looked into getting roommates, subletting, all sorts. But by that point, I was already too deep in debt, and there was just no way I was going to be able to stay.

So I started the long and painful process of moving in with my sister. It was… humiliating. The flat she lived in with her husband was much smaller than the house, and I couldn't afford a storage unit, so much of what I owned, a lot of which had once belonged to my grandfather, had to be thrown away. We actually got into a blazing row over his old khukuri.

He had been a Ghorkali, serving in the 5th Gurkha Rifles during the second World War. I have… complicated feelings on his military history, of course, but… he had always been fiercely proud of it. And that old knife had been one of his most treasured possessions. I didn't keep it polished like *he* had, even at ninety years old, but it reminded me of him. I could see his calloused hand on its hilt as he meticulously, almost mechanically, cleaned it, humming a tune the name of which I never learned. He had been a man of discipline, in

many ways many harsh, but he loved me and my sister very much, and the idea of throwing away his blade felt like a – kick in my chest.

In the end, she agreed, though, and it wasn't long before I was spending my last nights in an almost-abandoned house, shelves bare and wardrobes empty, trying my best to sleep on a mattress I knew I was leaving behind.

The letter came the next day. The envelope was slightly damp, like it had been carried through the rain, and it had my name printed on the front in a business-like Sans serif font. It looked at first like any other piece of financial junk mail you might glance at once and throw away, but I read it anyway.

The letter claimed to be from a financial firm named Eberhart and Strauss. At least, those were the names on the letterhead. The first words did nothing to dissuade me from my assumption it was junk mail. *'Drowning in debt? We can help!'* in big, friendly text that seemed at odds with the pseudo-respectable image the rest of it seemed to be striving for.

But as I read through it, I realized that… not only was it addressed to me specifically – not a difficult job for modern batch printing – but it made references to some very specific aspects of my situation. Precise amounts of debt. Names of creditors, and the sort of details that made it clear that this was definitely written to me. It didn't give any indication of the exact assistance that Eberhart and Strauss was supposedly offering, but it did give an address, and told me to

call on them at my convenience. At the bottom, in that same friendly typeface, it assured me that ‘we can help with the pressure.’

I don’t know what I expected; I really don’t. What, they were just going to hand me ten grand and another four hundred a month to cover the rent increase? I mean, I knew about loan sharks, and debt consolidation companies, and the dozens of other scams that prey on those in desperate situations like mine. This was just going to be another one of them. But, the letter had been to me specifically, and maybe somewhere in the back of my mind… I was genuinely hoping for a way out.

The address they gave me was for a tall, thin building in Hammersmith that housed about a half dozen more firms and a couple of tech startups. It didn’t look like the sort of place that high-prestige businesses would have their premises?, and more than one of the names listed on the plaque next to the revolving door had been roughly scratched out, I assume indicating they were no longer in business.

I asked at the front desk about Eberhart and Strauss, and was directed to an extremely cramped lift that rattled me up to the fourth floor. There was a buzzer next to the door, and it seemed to be broken and made no sound at all when I pressed it. My finger came away wet, and looking up, I could see some sort of leak in the ceiling, dripping water down onto the button. I tried the handle, and the door opened, quietly.

The rooms beyond were empty. Bare wooden floors, no curtains or

wallpaper, a few abandoned chairs and cheap-looking desks. The light switch did nothing, though the dull grey light of a cloudy day filtered through the window bright enough to see by. Every surface was damp, slick with old water and warped with mildew. It dripped slowly down the walls and seeped into the rotten wood of what furniture was left. I could see a line of liquid in the bare lightbulbs.

I was confused; obviously, I was, and stepped back out to double-check the door, and sure enough; these were the offices of Eberhart and Strauss. I felt… disgust rise in my throat; the awful, humid air of the waterlogged place sitting heavy in my lungs. I checked the draws in one of the desks, but… even if the mushy pulp inside had once been paper, it wasn't anymore. Confused and angry, I turned around and left.

It started raining on the walk home. When would you start to worry about the rain? I don't mean about it ruining your day or wrecking an event you're planning, but at what point does it stop being normal and start to alarm you? I've lived my whole life in London, so I've seen plenty of rain in my time. I've lived through weeks when you catch what minutes you can when the sky closes for a moment and you can run to the bus stop. I've seen poorly maintained roads turn into tiny lakes, and I've seen Hackney towns turned into a muddy swamp. So the first day didn't worry me.

The rain pounded down steadily outside, and I sat in my bare, dismal home, waiting for my sister to pick me up. It drummed on the roof, rhythmic and insistent, cascading off in tiny waterfalls, and just for a moment… I found myself almost completely at peace.

Then I felt a drop, heavy and wet, land on the back of my neck, and it shattered all at once. I looked up, and I saw the spreading patch of damp in the center of my ceiling. Evicted or not, part of me recoiled to see my home starting to finally crumble, as though my leaving would take the last part of its hope.

The water was warm, and after the heat of the summer's day, I breathed in, expecting the smell of petrichor. But the scent of the rain was something else, something earthy and cloying I couldn't quite place.

It was a storm; there seemed to be no doubt of that, and I didn't blame Boana *[?]* for not wanting to drive in this weather. I was a bit annoyed that she hadn't called, but looking at my phone it was quite clear it wasn't getting any signal.

Now, that wasn't necessarily a surprise, given the storm, but it did present me with a problem: Namely, that my television and computer had already been sent over to my sister's place, and without any signal, I was left with pretty much two options: sit doing nothing and listen to the rain, or head out into it. I opened the door for about three seconds before I decided that sitting and waiting was the better choice.

I walked upstairs, pulled a seat to the window overlooking the road, and… I sat there, watching. The drains were already starting to flood, puddles growing around the parked cars, reaching up and over, eager to meet in the middle to turn from a pool of water into something much more. I expected cars, maybe people running

desperately to their homes, but the street outside was quiet, save for the pounding of the downpour.

Ten minutes. Twenty. Half an hour passed, and I didn't see a single soul. Not a car, or a bike, not even a bus. That started to worry a bit; the 394 should pass by every fifteen minutes or so, but I definitely hadn't seen it. Did they know something I didn't? Was there some sort of weather warning out that I'd missed, for Hackney?

That was when I heard the first peal of thunder. There was no lightning, I want to be very clear on that. Nothing broke the uniform iron grey of the sky, dark and solid as far as I could see. But the thunder hit like a hammer. It rolled, deeper than I had heard even in the most *violent* of storms, and it just… *kept going*. I could feel it shaking through my whole body, and for a moment I thought that I was wrong, and it must have been a proper earthquake. Then it faded, and the world was silent again, save the impact of the rain.

When my watch told me it was nine o'clock, I dragged myself over to the mattress and told myself I might as well sleep through the rest of the storm, even though the sky seemed no darker than before. I tried to relax, and let the rhythmic tapping of the rain lull me off to sleep, like it always had when I was a boy, but I could find no comfort in it. It sounded too much like it wanted to get in.

The thunder woke me, another long, deep roar that seemed to come as much from the ground as it did from the clouds. The rain still

hammered down outside, and I checked my watch, staring at it in confusion. It didn't make any sense. It said it was three AM, the middle of the night, but looking out of the window, the world was still light.

The sky was cloudy and grey, as it had been the previous day, and the rain made it impossible to see further than the end of the street. But all the same, it definitely wasn't *night*. There were no streetlights turned on, and, now that I looked for it, I couldn't see any windows lit in any of the other houses on the street. It seemed like it was just me. Me and the steady, driving rain.

The road was beginning to properly flood now, with an inch or two of water creeping up over the edges, and starting to cover the pavement and climbing up the tires of the parked cars. I started to consider trying to leave. Perhaps I had missed some sort of official evacuation, some huge storm warning, and I was in terrible danger.

But no, that was ridiculous; this wasn't some rural town panicking at the prospect of a flash flood; this was *East London*. If there was some sort of disaster coming, I would've *seen something*, an emergency vehicle, or at least someone in a high-vis vest. *(sigh)* I was overreacting. It was just the rain keeping everybody home. They all just wanted to stay dry.

I lied to myself until the water was too high for me to even consider going outside in it, and I was trapped. By the time it started to pour into the downstairs of the house, I had just about accepted that, whatever was going on, there was no longer a day or a night, just

the storm and the rain and the thunder.

It's odd how you gradually come to accept things as real. By the time you drop the last of your rationalizations, there's no longer any surprise left in you, just an awareness that no matter how wrong it might feel, it's the reality you're now in. I walked down the stairs, as low as I could without stepping into the water, and I watched it.

It was dark and murky, obscuring anything below its surface as soon as it was covered. I reached my hand out, and pushed it gently into the flood. It was warm, as warm as my hand and moments after the water covered it, my mind could no longer easily tell where my skin ended and the water began. It should only have been half a foot deep at most, but reaching in I couldn't feel the floor. I pulled my hand out and returned upstairs.

By the time the rain stopped, it was halfway up the staircase, and had almost completely submerged the cars parked outside. The thrumming of the rain gave way to sudden silence, and for a moment I allowed myself the smallest sliver of hope. The streets outside were still, the top of the floodwaters flat and undisturbed. The sky remained those same dingy clouds, but it seemed to be holding its breath.

Then, one by one, the headlights on the cars lit up. They shone out into the water that covered them, faintly illuminating the murky liquid for a few feet below the surface. And that's when I finally saw things moving. Silhouettes gliding through the water with

smooth, undulating motions. They might've been the shape of people; it was hard to tell for sure. They moved too fast, darting in and out of the lights, before my eyes could fully register what they were seeing.

I left the window and returned to the mattress. I was tired; I was hungry; and, without the motion of the rain, the air had become intolerably humid. Every breath I took filled my lungs with that thick, wet scent, and it felt like I could barely get enough oxygen to think. The walls of my house were slick with moisture, now, and there was nowhere I could go to be dry, no way out of this oppressive, cloying damp. Then the thunder came for the last time. It shook and rattled with more force than it ever had before, and the empty oak wardrobe fell over with a crash.

I ran to the window and found that the floodwaters were rising again, but faster this time, and not because of any rain. The house, the street, the *world*, was sinking into that unending line of water, which I was now certain stretched out to the horizon. Inch by inch, foot by foot, everything was descending into the water's embrace. It would wrap itself around me, reach down my throat and fill me with its choking darkness.

There was nothing I could do. As the water reached the top of the stairs and started to flow out towards my open bedroom door, I looked around desperately for any escape that I might have overlooked. And I saw something lying just behind the fallen wardrobe. It must have fallen there months ago. It was the worn leather sheath to my grandfather's khukuri.

I walked over and picked it up. I stared at it. I could feel that warm, grasping water cover my feet, my ankles, slowly working its way up my calf, but in that moment all I could think about was my grandfather, and how he had looked when they gave him his diagnosis: Calm and solid.

He had thanked his doctor, without hesitation, and although I knew he had been afraid, he had spent those last months methodically preparing for the end. He had always endured his problems, never trying to squirm out of things he felt he had to face.

I gripped the sheath in both my hands and waded to the window. Corpses floated by, slowly waving at me gently, their lifeless hands grey and bloated. I ignored them, and stepped out into the water.

I don't know if you have ever drowned, but it's the most *painful* thing I have ever experienced. I tried to remain calm, to think on my grandfather and his firm, stony face, but even he had begged the painkillers at the end. Even he had been afraid.

My lungs spasmed painfully, desperately trying to wring air out of the warm, rancid water that filled them, and as I felt the water embrace me fully, pressing in on all sides, I gripped the last connection I had to the world I knew. The last thing I was conscious of was the water getting colder.

I don't – remember them fishing me out of Regent's Canal, or much of my treatment, to be honest. At a certain point it all blurs together. I'm alive, and that's what matters. And I've been living

with my sister and her husband for a month or two. She doesn't believe me, of course, and is keen to put the whole thing behind us, though I catch her staring at me sometimes. I suspect she thinks I might have done it on purpose… but she doesn't know. She doesn't know what it's like, to really hear the rain.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

(sigh) One thing that always strikes me when I read statements like this is… the bias of survivorship. With one or two notable exceptions, the only statements the Institute receives are those where the witness has successfully escaped whatever terrible place or being has marked them for a victim. I wonder how many don't make it out. How many of those shapes in the water were once just like Mr. Shakya.

Hm. *(dry laugh)* Or perhaps I shouldn't wonder. Even as I say it, I can feel the knowledge pushing at my mind, eager to find a way in.

But I don't want it. I don't want to know. I don't want to see. No more than I wanted to see how Gertrude stopped the Buried, and their ritual, but *that* came to me as well. *(short sigh of a laugh)* They called it "the Sunken Sky," and she calculated, correctly, that casting a Void-touched body down the pit at the right time would be enough to disrupt it. Something she found, in Jan Kilbride.

But Gertrude also realized that the body need not be alive. Or in one piece. She thought it was a mercy. It wasn't.

I don't like this. I don't like not being sure what's going to be in my mind. What thoughts are mine and what are from… *elsewhere*. Why I just know some statements are just what I should be reading. I assume this one is related to the coffin, to Daisy. I haven't heard from Basira since she left on whatever secret errand, and I'm no closer to understanding any of this.

(sigh) I suppose, if this one managed to free himself from the Buried, I-I-I – to find a way out of whatever part of choked embrace is drowning, I-I-I –

[The static of the Archivist begins.]

I need an anchor. I – I could go in myself – I could find her, and – then I'd just need to get out.

[The static stops.]

I need something out *here*. Something I can **know** the way back to. I – I don't know what. But… *(short, dry laugh)* It's a start. *(genuine delight)*

End recording.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG130 – Meat

Statement #0081912

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, GERTRUDE'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

GERTRUDE

Do you mind?

LUCIA

What? Oh – no.

GERTRUDE

Excellent.

[Sound of a metal chair being pulled out, the legs dragging against the floor.]

LUCIA

Why tape recorder? Why not digital?

GERTRUDE

Well, there's nothing wrong with *tape.* A bit old-fashioned, but I

suppose *(amused)* so am I.

LUCIA

Right. ..Yes, tha-that's fine. It's all fine.

GERTRUDE

Are you quite ready?

LUCIA

(intake of breath) Ah – Um -… Will it help?

GERTRUDE

I'm sorry?

LUCIA

Telling my story. Do you… will-will it help with the nightmares?

GERTRUDE

If that's your primary goal, my dear, I would suggest you speak to a qualified counselor. We can suggest one, if you like.

That said, I do believe most people find the process of giving a statement to be rather… mm, cathartic. And whatever nightmares your experiences left you with, I'm sure they won't be bothering you much longer.

LUCIA

Okay, then. *(hm)* So. What do I do?

GERTRUDE

Let's start with your name.

LUCIA

Oh. *(embarrassed laugh)* Uh – Lucia. Lucia Wright.

GERTRUDE

And what is your statement regarding?

LUCIA

Just um… a hole. A hole filled with, uh… with meat.

GERTRUDE

Gertrude Robinson recording. December 19th, 2008. In your own time.

LUCIA

Right, okay, so. Um. I was on holiday, actually, meant to be, at least. No, no, I was. Whatever happened later, it was, technically, a holiday. Sorry. I'm rambling. I like to travel, when I can. I'm not one of those people who can take months and months and… go swimming with dolphins or… climb Machu Picchu. My job is very high-pressure. Well. It was.

The point is, I… used to take a lot of city breaks. Spending a long

weekend flying off to anywhere with decent flights, and… seeing the sights. I generally try to take in an art gallery, a-a few of the best restaurants the guidebook recommends, and somewhere with a decent view of the whole city. And of course, a couple of churches.

I've… always had an odd relationship with churches. I suppose I was raised Church of England, but my parents were never very involved with it, and when I told them I wanted to stop going when I was fourteen, they didn't make a fuss. I had a few years as an angry atheist, but when I was about twenty, I swung back the other way a bit, and became pretty fascinated with religion. Not in a believe sense, but I found it all really interesting, especially early Christianity and the church-so much politics over what it means to be good, to be holy. So many heresies about the Trinity, about – how human Jesus was, about – how many nails they used to crucify him – but more than that. I loved churches. These big, quiet, echoing spaces of peace and beauty, designed to quiet the soul, and prepare it for communion with the divine. Even if I didn't actually believe in the god they were supposed to house, I always found them… meditative.

And whenever I went on one of my breaks, I'd always try to find a local church- hopefully not too full of other tourists like me – and spend an hour or two in quiet contemplation. I'd listen to the shuffling footsteps of the other people, and breathe in the lingering smell of incense, before lighting a candle to my grandmother. She had always been very religious- although, since most of the churches I visited were picked for their design, they tended to be

Catholic or Orthodox, and I'm not sure how happy she had been about my lighting a candle for her in them. Still, at the end of the day, I did it for me, not her. She's gone. There isn't anything but us.

Anyway, when a deal came up in the middle of October for five days in Istanbul, I jumped on it. I'd heard a lot of lovely things about the city itself, but more importantly, I'd just been reading a brilliant series of articles on early schisms in the church, specifically the various gnostic sects that started springing up around the fourth century, many located in what was then Constantinople, and is now Istanbul.

Do you know about gnosticism? It's the sort of dualism that places the purity and goodness of the spiritual world in opposition to the baseness and corruption of the material world. Some gnostic movements even go so far as to posit the existence of the demiurge: A counterpoint to the god of the spiritual world, who created material existence as a warped, imperfect imitation of its purity. Everything that is base, corrupt, and vile in the physical world comes from them. If God, as gnostics see him, is the god of the soul, then the demiurge could easily be called the god of the flesh. Of-bone and blood. Of meat.

I had read about an old gnostic temple some miles outside of Istanbul, and decided to make a short trip out to see it. When I got there, though, there was nothing but a disappointment. What the artfully lit photos had shown as stark and ancient, were in person just… empty and old. Whatever decoration there once had been had long since worn away, and only the occasional plastic tourist signs

indicated it had ever been a place of worship. Whatever peace I was looking for, I wasn't going to find it there. It was barely more than a ruin. More than that. I seemed to be almost entirely alone. There had been an old woman coming out of it when I arrived, but I hadn't seen anyone apart from her, not even at the ticketing booth.

As I wandered the small building, I became more and more aware of the quiet, and of the wind that blew gently through the open windows. I did my best to shrug off the growing feeling of unease that had settled over me, and walked back outside. The taxi that had taken me had long since departed, and the temple stood alone, some distance from any other inhabited building. The afternoon was wearing on, and I didn't fancy trying to walk all the way back to my hotel, but my initial plan of asking a staff member to call me another taxi was somewhat scuppered by their absence.

As I was considering my options, I heard the roar of an engine, and looked over to see a heavy-looking truck slowly rolling down the street towards me. It had no obvious markings, and the back of it was covered with a grey tarp. For some reason it filled me with the most intense dread I've ever felt, and I found myself stepping back, behind a pillar, desperately hoping I was out of sight.

The truck pulled around the side of the building, and I heard the engine stop. I crept forward, still not sure why I had such instinctive terror of what seemed to be on the surface a perfectly normal vehicle. But as three men climbed out of the front, and started to walk back towards the covered load, I started to realize I could smell something. Damp. Slightly sour, with the faintest hint of iron.

I realized what it was a moment before the tarpaulin fell, and revealed the huge pile of pink and white and brown. A-At first I thought the bodies were all human-that perhaps I had somehow stumbled upon some sort of – gang, disposing of a massacre's worth of corpses.

But then some of them started to move. Squirming limbs were dragging, rising, extracting themselves from this massive mound of flesh, and making their way down to join their companions on the ground, one by one. Most of them could still be mistaken for humans at a distance. A few even wore clothes. No one said a word.

After a minute or so, it looked like everything that was going to climb down off the truck had done so. The pile of meat still rose several meters up from the back of the truck, and as much as I wanted to look away, I couldn't. M-most of it was just-unidentifiable chunks, but a lot of it was clearly animal: chickens, lambs; I even saw a whole pig head.

Some of it was human. I could see a man's torso near the top of the pile and an arm jutted out near the base, the hand splayed out at the end. I had the weirdest impulse to *wave* at it. The driver – or, the one I assume was the driver – then started to reach up onto the pile. He took a handful of meat, and turned to- whoever or whatever was nearest to him. He passed it on to them, and then they would turn, and head towards the back of the temple, towards an unmarked temple I'd assumed was staff only.

Now it was open, and they went in, one at a time. They didn't come

back out. All this time, I'd just been watching from my hiding spot, totally frozen in confusion and fear. As I said, the temple stood apart from any other buildings, and.. if I tried to leave, the chances were higher that I'd be spotted. I thought I could maybe just wait. Just. Stay where I was until these people had finished doing whatever it was they were doing. And then they would drive away, and I would leave, and spend the rest of my life pretending I had never seen anything, *(breath)* that I had gone to an art gallery instead.

This plan lasted right up until the driver saw me. It was my own fault. My leg was starting to cramp up, so I tried to shift position – but I didn't realize just how painful it would be to move, and I let out a cry before I had a chance to stifle it. The driver's head snapped up and focused on me. He was rail-thin, dressed in rough overalls, with shaggy black hair and pale skin. He was East Asian – Chinese, maybe, but he called me over in a crisp British accent. His tone was firm, but unhurried, and to my ears, not immediately threatening. So I did as he asked.

I walked, slowly, but deliberately over to him, hands out to my side, doing my best to show him I wasn't a threat. I made the decision that-whatever was happening, my best chance to make it out was just – keep doing as I was asked.

By the time I reached the truck, the smell was so thick I could taste it. I stood there, legs shaking, muttering a prayer to a god I didn't even believe in. He stared at me for what felt like hours, but – can't have been longer than a few seconds. And he shrugged. Turned to

the truck and picked up what looked like the back half of a goat. He held it out to me, expectantly. Honestly, I was so surprised I just took it on instinct. The driver nodded to himself, like he'd made the right decision, and I turned, and started to walk towards the door, afraid that any hesitation might make him reconsider, mark me out as something *other* than what he had decided I was.

I – don't eat much meat, and rarely ever cook it myself, but I held that cold haunch to me like a talisman. As if it might ward whatever awful thing waited inside that door. As I got closer, I saw one of the others, a tall, gangly woman with arms that bent backwards leaving the entrance. She had to stoop to get through. But as she raised back up to her full height, I felt her eyes rest on me for a second. I didn't slow my pace or meet her gaze. She walked past me quickly, on the way back to the truck for her next load.

I stepped through the entrance, moving carefully down what looked to be a rough-hewn stone stairway. It went deeper and deeper, far below where any normal basement might have been. So narrow at points that I had trouble fitting. My mind kept trying to imagine meeting one of the less human-looking things coming back up the other way, but I didn't let it. Finally, I reached the bottom, and stepped out into a scene I s-s-still see every time I close my eyes.

I don't know how big the room would have been to begin with. Only one side had anything that might've once been considered an interior wall. The others were rough rock and stone, clearly hollowed out and extended until the place must have been almost

forty yards across. In the middle of the floor, taking up almost the entirety of the strange vault, was a pit. *(mm)* No, not a pit. Not exactly. The others stood around the edge, throwing their burdens down into it one piece at a time. And there, at the bottom, was another pile. One that dwarfed the truck outside. One that would have dwarfed a hundred trucks. Because I couldn't actually see the bottom. For all I know, it could've gone down forever, an endless pillar of flesh.

But then it moved, and I realized in a second what it actually was I was looking at. Not a pit. A *mouth*. I feel a strange, deep pride that I didn't scream. I didn't panic, though my mind felt like it was trying to shut down at the repulsive sight. Instead, I forced myself to take my place there at the edge, and hurl my… offering down into it. It accepted it greedily. I wish I could say I ran, then, or that I found a clever trick to escape, but I didn't. When I returned to the surface, I was handed more meat, before I even had a chance to consider getting away.

So I decided I would keep up the ruse until the truck was empty, in the hopes that I would have a chance later. But as we unloaded the last of the grim cargo, and I carried a heavy, red tongue down into the vault, I saw another truck pull up, almost identical to the first; then another; then *another*.

There was no end to them. Day turned into night turned into day again, and still I carried meat, and threw it into the hole. And my back was screaming. My legs were weak. And my mind was numb from terror. But I was spurred on by one thing: the woman with the

backwards arms had fallen, sometime in the night, and her companions had showed no hesitation. They had gripped her shoulders, hoisted her up, and hurled her straight into the gaping maw. I swore it wouldn't happen to me.

All through this, the mouth got closer and closer to the edge of the pit. The pile of flesh within it grew larger and larger, sat there in an awful, half-solid slurry, chewed and crushed together. It was impossible to tell what had once been animal, and what might have once been us. It was all just *meat*.

And as the mouth got closer, the smell got stronger. The air became thick, and the walls began to sweat a pinkish liquid, like cutting into a steak. More of those workers had been thrown in, replaced by others brought in the- endless procession of meat trucks. I didn't know what was going to happen when it finally reached the top, but I knew it would be something bad. Something unspeakable. And I would have helped make it happen.

When the explosion came, it was a blessed relief. A deep rumble passed through the structure of the building, a deafening cry of rage and dismay that came from below, as the roof collapsed downwards, burying it under a torrent of rubble and stone.

I was lucky. At that moment, I had been stood in the bottom of the stairwell, and as the world collapsed around me, I began to sprint up the stairs. But I barely made it halfway up before that toppled as well, and I felt the foundations of the temple above fall down around me. I thought I was dead. I wish I had been.

I don't know how long I lay-trapped there before Turkish rescue workers found me. Certainly long enough that the scent of rot began to waft up from far below. I was delirious and barely conscious. I-I tried to warn them, to tell them to finish the job – but all that did was convince them that there might be other survivors.

They, um, haven't told me what they found down there. They paid for my flight home, but haven't told me anything. I don't know anything. I, I just want to sleep. *(businesslike tone)* That's it. That's all I have. That's what happened.

GERTRUDE

And… Do you feel any better?

LUCIA

No.

GERTRUDE

Well that's a shame. Hang on, let me see if I can find you the number for that counseling service. They're, They're actually quite good.

[As she speaks, she moves, and we hear the rustling of her clothes and a couple of footsteps.]

LUCIA

If you say so.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, GERTRUDE'S OFFICE, LATER]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

GERTRUDE

Well. That is a relief. When I heard there had been survivors of the Last Feast, I was rather concerned that one of them might be able to positively identify me, *(ha)* which could land me in all sorts of trouble. *(she inhales)* But she doesn't seem to remember me at all.

Tom Haan might be a bit more of a problem, as it looks like he also survived, but I'm hopeful he has been weakened enough by this failure to not be an issue in the near future. Hopefully, he'll fade away or burn out as they tend to when robbed of their purpose. Still, I should keep a watch on him in case of any erratic behavior that might lead to complications. Also worth watching out for any… additional esoteric fallout from the ritual attempt, like that Carlisle boy down in Wandsworth.

Dekker really came through with the explosives. It almost felt like cheating. Sad about the loss of history, but… Miss Wright didn't seem to think the old gnostic church got many visitors anyway. I'm honestly impressed she had the strength to get through it, even if she does seem to have been.. deeply affected by it. Shame about the dreams. I would avoid them if I could.

At least we know for sure that these grand rituals can be disrupted by conventional means, though a more… nuanced approach will be needed for some of them, I'm sure.

Also… I can't rely on having this much lead time. I've had ten years tracking supplicants drawn by the siren call of flesh, watching them gradually stockpiling meat. Very useful, in terms of preparation time for derailing the final push, but in future, I think I need to get a little bit more… pro-active.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST

I found this tape tucked in a corner of my desk drawer *(sigh)* covered in cobwebs. I suppose subtlety has gone out the window a bit, and the question is now simply… how much I trust the Spider to have my best interests at heart.

Hm. I suspect my assuming it has a heart might be a clue I'm looking at this the wrong way. *(sigh)* Even so, and – leaving aside the matter of Gertrude's actions for a moment – what is it trying to tell me with this? Is it about… rituals? About getting Daisy back?

About – About an anchor. What was it she said, “the siren call of flesh.” Hm. It’s possible, I suppose. It would – *hurt*, but – well, what’s another scar?

(small sigh) It’s been two weeks since I heard from Basira. I’m not waiting any longer. I’m getting Daisy back.

End recording.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG131 – Flesh

Statement #0182003

[CLICK]

[DEEP BREATH]

[BREATHING INTENSIFIES]

[DETERMINED EXHALATION]

[THUNK]

[A WHIMPER]

[WET RIPPING, AS OF EXTRACTING A BLADE FROM FLESH]

[PAINED SOUNDS]

[TAPE CRACKLING AS THE ARCHIVIST GRUMBLES AND BREATHING EVENS OUT]

[CLEARING OF THROAT AS A SECOND CLEAVING IS ATTEMPTED]

[THUNK]

[MORE WHIMPERING]

[FLESHY EXTRACTION AND TAPE CRACKLING AGAIN]

ARCHIVIST

[Pained frustration] Oh, come on… Everyone else can carve up the Archivist, but when he actually needs it…

[NOISE OF FRUSTRATION AS METAL CLATTERS TO THE GROUND]

MELANIE

What're you doing?

ARCHIVIST

[Surprised] Oh! Uh…

[CLOSES DESK DRAWER]

Melanie, I-I'm… S-Sorry, I didn't, er… I didn't know you were there.

MELANIE

[Enunciating carefully] What are you doing?

ARCHIVIST

I'm… Would you believe I'm… trying to save Daisy?

MELANIE

[Sharply] With more bullshit surgery?

ARCHIVIST

Oh I… Melanie, I-I-I'm so sorry.

MELANIE

[Weary] Oh, fuck off!

ARCHIVIST

I was trying to save your life.

MELANIE

Yes, well… you did. I think. But I also, y'know, see your face now, when I wake up screaming. I feel you digging into my leg. Chalk it up as a win for Team Archive, I guess.

ARCHIVIST

I wanted to ask you.

MELANIE

And if you had, we wouldn't be talking right now. I'd have said no, and I'd probably have hurt you. Basira was right. The only way to do it was to completely betray my trust, and destroy any remaining

sense of safety.

So, yes. Thank you.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, I-I'm… I'm surprised you can stand to see either of us.

MELANIE

[Frustratedly] Who else is there? I mean, Basira is… heh. She's been the only one for a long time and, yes, I, sort of, maybe, hate her now. I don't know. I can't **look** at her without my leg hurting. But **what** else am I going to do? I don't want to be on my own, and I'm stuck here. So…

ARCHIVIST

Basira said you were doing better.

MELANIE

[Distressed] Would you just stop? *[Getting agitated]* This isn't better. I'm not *dying,* and I don't want to kill you. It's – It's… it's just **different**! Yes, it's sort of, 'better', maybe, but… but I can't –

ARCHIVIST (BACKGROUND)

No… Right, no I – Y-Yeah, Melanie –

Melanie…

MELANIE

Don't tell me to calm down! Don't you **dare**!

ARCHIVIST

Right, yes, I…

[MELANIE EXHALES, REGATHERING COMPOSURE]

MELANIE

Basira is… um. Basira deals in 'intel' these days, in usable data, assets. Not feelings. Not people. Crying, shaking, nightmares… that **is** better. It doesn't feel like it, but as far as Basira sees it… I'm not 'compromised' anymore. And… that… is better.

ARCHIVIST

At least it's out. Maybe… maybe It's enough to start healing? Start letting go of the anger.

MELANIE

Oh just stop! Just stop and listen!

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

MELANIE

[Charged tones] Yes, the bullet was bad, right, but it didn't *make* me angry. Anger is… Anger's been all I've had for a very long time.

Years. Maybe since… oh, I, I don't know. But everything I've done, everything I pushed for was because I was angry.

Angry at being passed over, being disrespected, ignored. That sort of anger, it – it *powers* you. Right up until it slips out and hurts someone.

I **hurt** someone. And then one day, I suddenly have this thing that takes all that rage, and it holds it, tells me it's right, that it's **me**. It didn't stay in my leg because of some ghostly master plan. It *stayed* because I wanted it.

ARCHIVIST

[Realising] Shit.

MELANIE

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

…

Melanie, I –

MELANIE

So, why are you trying to chop off your finger?

ARCHIVIST

[Awkwardly] Oh! I… I um… I nee-need a… I've been thinking of it

a-as an anchor. I think. I… know. Something I have a connection to, th-that I can use to find my way out of the Coffin when I reach Daisy. I-I figured the strongest anchor would be… part of my own body.

MELANIE

Okay. So… just cut it off.

ARCHIVIST

I'm doing my best.

MELANIE

Hmph. Can't go through with it?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, th-the blade keeps going in. And… it hurts. Hurts plenty.

But then it heals up. Pretty much the moment I take it out. No wound, no scar, nothing.

MELANIE

I could try?

ARCHIVIST

I… don't think that would be a good idea right now.

MELANIE

Maybe not.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, you'd think I'd have a better idea how to do it.

All these… all these statements and…

[SMALL LAUGH]

You know who I need? I need the Boneturner. *[Sighs]* Just reach in and grab a rib. Job done.

MELANIE

…

ARCHIVIST

What?

Melanie?

MELANIE

Come with me.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS ON STONE, VOICES SOUND ECHOEY]

ARCHIVIST

I was down here just yesterday, and there wasn't –

MELANIE

Here.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. This, this door… It shouldn't be here.

MELANIE

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

I, uh… I don't want to open it.

I'm not going to.

[MELANIE SIGHS, KNOCKS ON THE DOOR]

MELANIE

She's been helping us.

ARCHIVIST

[Sharply] **It** has never helped anyone. Not without a cost.

[THE DOOR CREAKS OPEN]

HELEN

If I am an “it”, Archivist, then what does that make you?

[THE DOOR CREAKS CLOSED]

MELANIE

Hi, Helen.

ARCHIVIST

[Coldly] I have been told you can help.

HELEN

I have been trying to. But the last time you were very rude to me.

ARCHIVIST

You’re still wearing her face.

HELEN

Not this again. I’m not “wearing” anything, Archivist. I am at least as much ‘Helen Richardson’ as you are the ‘Jonathan Sims’ that first joined this Institute. Things change. *People* change. It happens.

ARCHIVIST

We’re not people, though, are we? Not any more.

HELEN

Names. Categories. It's all so important to you, isn't it? You *do* know none of it's actually real. It's all just meaningless boxes.

MELANIE

Is… *he* still in there?

HELEN

Oh, yes. He's not exactly something I can… digest. He's a bit of an irritant, to be honest. If you're looking to let him out, I could be persuaded.

ARCHIVIST

When did you say they attacked?

MELANIE

A couple of months ago.

ARCHIVIST

And he's been in there… ever since?

HELEN

I helped clean up.

MELANIE

After I, uh… took care of things.

ARCHIVIST

All this time. Why didn't anyone tell me?

MELANIE

Basira said not to.

ARCHIVIST

I see.

Why didn't you kill him?

MELANIE

I stabbed him in **three** different hearts. Didn't work. If you want to go hunting for a fourth, knock yourself out.

ARCHIVIST

I…er… I'm alright, I think

MELANIE

So, what's the plan?

ARCHIVIST

Right. I go in, I offer freedom if he… helps. Then I hope he doesn't kill me. If he tries anything…

HELEN

I would suggest running. Try to find a door.

ARCHIVIST

Naturally.

[DEEP BREATH]

Oh, er… Er, pass the recorder?

MELANIE

Seriously? Fine.

[RECORDER IS PASSED TO THE ARCHIVIST]

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[THE DOOR CREAKS OPEN]

[FOOTSTEPS]

[THE DOOR CREAKS CLOSED]

[ECHOES & STATIC AS THE ARCHIVIST WANDERS THE DISTORTION'S CORRIDORS]

ARCHIVIST

Hello?

[MORE WALKING]

Is, uh… Uh, hello?

[KEEPS WALKING]

Did I –

[SOFT SQUELCHING STEPS]

No. W-Wait… I came from…

[WET, FLESHY MOVEMENT AND CRACKING BONES]

Er, J-Jared Hopworth?

JARED

That's what it says on me licence.

(Transcriber's Note: Jared's speech is accompanied by continuous sounds of wet, mobile meat and the occasional bony snap or click. Too much for me to record individually. Just try to imagine that as you're reading… if you care to, that is.)

Mind you, the picture's a bit out of date.

[WET, MEATY LAUGH]

ARCHIVIST

Y-yes.

JARED

I try to kill you. And you throw me in here. And now what? You just walk in?

ARCHIVIST

I-I didn't – That wasn't me.

JARED

Your people. Your *gaff*.

ARCHIVIST

And you wanted to kill… *me,* specifically?

JARED

Still do.

[OMINOUS SHIFTING, CRACKING & POPPING]

ARCHIVIST

Right. But… you know if you do, you're never getting out of this place.

JARED

…

What do you want?

ARCHIVIST

I, uh… I want a favour.

JARED

For letting me out?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

JARED

Alright.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. O-Okay. D-Do you need to know… w-what it is?

JARED

Not much you could want, comin' to me. Put summat in. Take summat out. Which is it?

ARCHIVIST

Take something out.

A bone. A rib, probably. S-Something I won't miss.

JARED

Done. Come 'ere.

ARCHIVIST

I, uh… H-How do I know you won't just reach in and kill me? W-W-What guarantees do I have?

JARED

Guarantees? None. But I want to leave more than I want to kill you. Not like it was my idea in the first place.

ARCHIVIST

So…

[Compellingly] Why did you and the others attack us?

JARED

I was asked. You want my statement, that's gonna cost you another rib.

ARCHIVIST

I-I could just pull the information out of you.

[MENACINGLY MEATY MURMURS]

JARED

You could try.

ARCHIVIST

Okay. Fine. A rib for me, a rib for you, your freedom and a statement.

JARED

Yeah. Alright.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Statement first.

JARED

…

Fine.

ARCHIVIST

Uh. Statement of Jared Hopworth, the Boneturner.

Statement begins.

[THROATY LAUGH]

JARED (STATEMENT)

Where do you want me to start? Growing up? My folks? How ‘bout that growth spurt when I was nine? It left me taller than all the other kids. I hated them, the way they stared. But they were scared, and that felt good, even back then. It felt right. My Dad was proud of it too. He was a short man, bully, and watching me loom over people really made ‘im happy. Mum just scowled, but then… heh, she always did.

I *wrecked* my school. I did have friends, but they left me, one by one, until all that I had were the dregs; the ones who stayed ‘coz they were too scared to leave. We were always either in trouble, or looking for it. Those were bad times. I tried to look ahead, but I couldn’t see anything. No future, no hope; just bitter parents, and whatever misery I could pass on to everyone else. God knows what would’ve happened if that little prick Sebastian hadn’t given me that book.

I didn’t know what it was at first, not really. But it talked to me about bones and flesh and muscle and blood; the bits of myself I actually knew and liked. So I listened, and I read, and I learned. I fumbled through the lessons the book wanted to teach me, and my first try was clumsy. Stupid. Turns out, Dad didn’t like being tall nearly as much as he thought he would. And Mum didn’t like her new smile, either. So I left.

I wandered around for a bit. Worked a lotta jobs where it didn’t matter what you looked like. There’s always a spot for someone who can get rid of people. You must have heard about me. I left plenty of people scared and crying, itching to tell someone what

happened to ‘em. Some of them must have made it to you.

There were others. Others of skin and hunger; they tried to talk to me about gods. They’d go on and on about remaking the world; of a new day of blood and flesh. I told them to piss off. I like the world just as it is. I take what I want and I make myself more, and when people look at me… that fear – it feels amazing. Some of my mates, the ones I helped find their proper bodies, they listened, and went to feed the hunger. Not me though. I never was that ambitious.

The letters started comin’ in about two years ago. Good white paper, large print. Nice and simple. Dunno who sent them, they were never signed, and I dunno how they kept finding me. There was never much in them; normally just a name and a place or a time. I ignored the first couple, but they kept coming, and eventually I got curious. So, I followed the instructions in one of ‘em. I found Regan Hasnain of 70 Clairmont Gardens, and that got rid of most of my doubts. I don’t blame people for thinking that all bones are the same, most people don’t have much experience, but it’s not true. There are good bones, and there are bad bones, and Regan Hasnain had some very good bones in her. They were solid, healthy, and they jumped at my touch. I didn’t doubt the letters again.

They came pretty regular after that. And they always led to summat good. Quality bones, a new mate, or some unlucky fool who wouldn’t look at me for the fear. It got so I trusted them. The letters, I mean. So I didn’t question them. There’s a lotta stuff in this world I’ve never understood, and these were no different. Then I got

one about your lot, your Archives. Told me to go there and kill you. They even sent a picture.

So I did. Well, I tried. Didn't know about those tunnels or wherever this place is, but the pipes… they were wide enough for me and a few friends to squeeze through, bit by bit, one bone at a time.

[DEMONSTRATIVE CRACKING ACCOMPANIES THIS]

When we came up through the floor, it was wonderful. I don't think I'll ever forget the look on their faces. It was like their world had gone with the floor. The weak one legged it, and I thought the skinny one did too. There was just the copper. It weren't dressed like one, but I know police when I smell it. They tried to run, but we were everywhere, and they couldn't stop us undoing them for parts. You weren't there, which was sad, but it made it easier.

At least until the knife. I don't know what the skinny one did, what she was, but that knife **hurt**. She screamed, and stabbed, and cut through all the others, ruining their perfect bodies. Then, she turned on me. Reached out with some of my hands, to get inside her, and pull her apart, and she cut them off. I got… scared. So I ran. I ran through the first door I found. And now I don't know where I am.

I'm startin' to think the letters were a trap. Was it you? Did you want me here? 'Coz if so, well played. Mind you, lot of trouble to go through just to lose a rib, so maybe not.

That's it, then.

Do you want to do this, or what?

ARCHIVIST

That's it?

[HE SNORTS]

Hardly worth a rib.

[JARED LOOMS FORWARD]

[Placatingly] Alright! Alright.

Is it, uh… Is is going to hurt?

JARED

Dunno. Doesn't hurt me.

[THE ARCHIVIST MAKES IT BE KNOWN THAT IT DOES RATHER]

[EXTENDED SOUNDS OF MEAT AND BONE MOVEMENT]

That's yours. What's it for?

[PAINED SOUNDS OF RECOVERY]

ARCHIVIST

[Stumblingly] Um… A, A-An anchor

JARED

Huh. Right.

Anyway, this one's for me.

[MORE MOBILE MEAT NOISES, THIS TIME OF INSERTION]

Huh. That's a weird one. Not sure I like it. Still. Mine now.

ARCHIVIST

[Weakly] I supp… I suppose it is.

JARED

You said I could leave.

ARCHIVIST

Y-yes. Just, uh… I-If you start walking that way, I-I-I'm sure there'll be a door for you.

JARED

There'd better be.

ARCHIVIST

Y-Y-Yes, I, uh…

[COLLAPSES]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

HELEN

Still alive?

MELANIE

Seems to be, yes.

HELEN

And he's certainly holding *a* bone. For some reason.

MELANIE

Said it was going to be an anchor.

HELEN

Hmm. Bodies are strange. Rather glad they're not my concern anymore.

MELANIE

Must be nice.

HELEN

It really is.

MELANIE

…

Did you let that… *thing* go?

HELEN

He found a door.

MELANIE

[Alert] Where did he come out?

HELEN

The door may have been in a wall some distance above a river.

[MELANIE CHUCKLES]

MELANIE

Nice.

ARCHIVIST

[Groggy] Is it… um?

HELEN

All done.

ARCHIVIST

Uh…

[WINCES]

Thank you. For your… uh. For your help.

HELEN

You are very welcome. I have decided that I support what you're doing, and I'm happy to assist. I think we'll all be much happier this way.

MELANIE

Basira's not going to be happy that you let him out.

ARCHIVIST

Basira isn't here.

And if this works, I'll have Daisy waiting for her when she gets back, so I don't think she'll be thinking too much about Jared.

MELANIE

You're going now?

[PAINED CHUCKLING]

[PAINED BREATHING]

ARCHIVIST

No. No, now I am going for a lie down. That was… that was not what I expected.

MELANIE

Come on, you can use Basira's cot.

HELEN

Good luck, Archivist. Be seeing you.

[CLICK]

MAG132 - Entombed

Statement #0182403

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, COFFIN ROOM]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

(under his breath) Alright.

[He hits play on a different tape.]

DAISY (ON TAPE)

> […] Was a coffin. An old, wooden coffin. Rough, unvarnished. I could see splinters where the nails had been hammered in badly. Wrapped all around it was a thick metal chain ending in a heavy padlock. That weird moaning was coming from inside it. It was the only sound that cut through pounding rain.

[The Archivist clicks Daisy's tape off, and ejects it from the

player. We hear him put a fresh tape into what must be a player/recorder. He clicks it on. He takes a long, shaky breath, steeling himself for whatever is to come.]

ARCHIVIST

Hello, Melanie. I.. know I said we'd wait until Basira was back, b-but I, I don't… *(heavy sigh)* I-I'm sorry. I, I-I know she won't – *(sigh)* She'd want to do it a different way. But I know what I'm doing; this time I do. I, I hope. I have her voice. I think that should be enough to find her, and, and I'm leaving my – *(can't say it)* I'll leave it with the tape. I should be able to find my back to it. I think. *(pause)* Wish me luck.

…Although, I suppose if you're hearing this, then I… I didn't have any. I don't know. I, I'm – *(slight pause)* I'm scared? *(dry laugh)* When does the fear go away? *(pause)* A-Anyway, I'm sorry.

You too, Basira, if you're hearing this. *(pause)* I know you'd – stop me. You'd be right to, but – but if this goes wrong, all you lose is – *(abrupt)* I'm not risking anyone else. And I know – *(pause)* I-I think. I can get her out.

[He clicks the tape off.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

Right. You're coming with me.

[He sighs.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

Let's do this one properly.

[We hear a static begin to rise; it's from the coffin.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

No need for that. I'm willing.

[The static fades away as immediately as it came.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

Right.

[He lifts the padlock, and the chain rattles as he pulls it off and they fall to the floor. Then we hear the ominous rattling creak as he pulls open the lid of the coffin.]

[He clicks on a torch.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

(slightly shaky) Stone steps. Roughly hewn. *(slight pause)* They, uh… They keep going. *(brave face)* Well. No point in waiting.

[We can hear his breath shake slightly as he steps into the echoing coffin. The lid closes above him almost immediately with a hollow thump.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

Christ.

[He takes a deep, shaky breath, as well as a few steps.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. COFFIN]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[When the Archivist speaks, his voice sounds strained, as if he's under some sort of intense pressure. We hear his clothes rustle as he moves.]

ARCHIVIST

I'm not sure how long it's been. The steps ended, eventually. There's passages, but – it's very, uh… It's close. I'm having some trouble, but. I'm going the right way. I know it. I just – I-I just need to keep moving. When I stop, it –

[He grunts, takes another step.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

(even more strained) It starts to – p-press on me.

[More rustling.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

Just keep going.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

I-I can't stand. Anymore. I – It's – It's not a passage. Not anymore. It's a tunnel.

[The rustling noises get louder for a second.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

Barely that. But I'm – I'm definitely getting closer. *(strained)* If I can just –

[The rustling increases in volume and intensity as the Archivist makes a few sounds of exertion. Finally, he makes it through whatever tight space had been holding him back, and he lets out a noise of relief.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

My torch is broken. I didn't even drop it. It – It got caught against the wall, and –

[More rustling.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

Crushed. God, I – *(inhale)* I don't even know how long I've been here.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The Archivist's voice is much closer and definitely raspier.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

I – heard someone. He was begging of me to save him. Said he couldn't breathe. *(slight pause, gasp)* I can barely breathe. I couldn't

find him. But I am – *(strained)* not here for him. I don't even know him. I can't – I can't see anything here. For all this – this place closes around me, I-I feel adrift. Like nothing can get through the dirt and the muck and –

[He loses himself to the moving for a second.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

I still have Daisy's tape. And I still think I'm going the right way. When I move at all.

[The rustling gets louder and the motion more jerky.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

Feels like every inch costs me another scrape, o-or bruise. *(inhale, his voice sounds more normal)* I'd hoped I was beyond that, but apparently not. And –

[He lets out a very pained sound.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

The air is heavy. Soil and dust. I am – very thirsty. But I know I won't die of it. *(moving again)* I won't die of anything down here. Not ever. Not if I – can't find my way out. When I first came down, I could feel it, the – the part of myself I left outside, but – *(inhale)* But it's been getting fainter and now… I'll try not to think about it.

Don't – don't want to stretch my mind, to try and see, in case it's not there at all. I can't afford to think about it. Not now.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[We are immediately greeted with the Archivist's cry of pain.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

I-I think – *(more cries)* Oh god. I-I-I think I'm – I'm stuck.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[He's still stuck. We can tell by the extremely labored cries of pain. But then he stops. He's cut off by a roll of thunder.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

Wha-What?

[The droning rumbling continues, accompanied by the choral hum of the coffin, and as the Archivist takes several shaky

breaths of surprise, it gets louder.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

(whisper) Oh no. N–

[There's a crack, and a sound like a landslide or shifting rocks. The Archivist yells, makes several strangled sounds, followed by many more sounds of pain.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

Daisy! D-DAISY!

[More sounds of struggle.]

DAISY

(from far away) John!

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Background choral humming continues.]

ARCHIVIST

Daisy! Daisy, can you reach me?

DAISY

(is this a dream?) I can't. Can't see you.

ARCHIVIST

Follow my voice.

DAISY

Is that? – I, I can't –

[Pained sound from the Archivist.]

ARCHIVIST

Ah –

DAISY

You – You're real. You're *real*.

ARCHIVIST

Yes. *(pain)* I'm here, Daisy.

DAISY

(still hazy) Daisy. Yeah. Daisy. That's me.

[She lets out a short, mirthless laugh.]

ARCHIVIST

Are you alright? ##### [Background choral humming fades out.]

DAISY

I, I, I can't move; I – I can't – And I can't – *breathe,* and –

[She starts breathing heavier.]

ARCHIVIST

Oh, god.

DAISY

Just – *alone*. I, I think. I think. I hear, uh, this, sometimes – singing. When it's we – when it's wet. Or scratching, trying to get out – But I don't – I don't – *(struggling to get the words out)* I don't think there's – there's anyone – there. *(continues struggling)* It's just – It's just – me. Til now.

ARCHIVIST

Are you… Are you okay?

DAISY

No.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry. Obviously. No, I just meant – Y-You sound – okay.

DAISY

Do I?

ARCHIVIST

I thought you might've been – taken over. By the Hunt.

DAISY

What?

ARCHIVIST

The Hunt. You're a Hunter.

DAISY

(strained) Yeah – I guess I was. But – not here.

ARCHIVIST

No.

DAISY

No. I – I can't f-feel my blood. I could always feel it – I can't, It can't reach me here. *(struggles)* Where are we?

ARCHIVIST

The coffin. We're in the coffin. I-It leads to… Well, it's got a lot of

names. Choke. The Buried. *(pain)* Too-Close-I-Cannot-Breathe.

DAISY

Yeah. Sounds – sounds right.

ARCHIVIST

Come on. *(pain)* Let's get you out of here.

DAISY

Can't – can't move. Even – if I – if I could. There's no way out.

ARCHIVIST

It's okay, I've uh – I've got a plan.

DAISY

I-Is this like all your other plans?

ARCHIVIST

It's fine; I just – I just need to – to find it.

DAISY

What?

ARCHIVIST

Come on. Come on, where are you?

DAISY

John?

ARCHIVIST

Come on.

[A large, low rumbling begins. The Archivist's breath turns ragged. There's a static.]

DAISY

John?

ARCHIVIST

I know.

DAISY

Th-The way out?

ARCHIVIST

No. I know where we are. There is n-no out, not here. This is – This is forever deep below creation. Where the weight of existence bears down. This is The Buried, and we are alive. There isn't even an up. Oh god. *(pain)* What have I done? *(whispered)* What have I done?

[Silence, but for Daisy's breathing.]

DAISY

N-Not alone, though.

ARCHIVIST

(barely a whisper) No. No, not alone.

[More silence.]

DAISY

John?

ARCHIVIST

(immediately) Still here.

DAISY

Good, I – *(swallows)* Good. I-I-I-I want to talk.

ARCHIVIST

Okay, um. What do you want to talk about?

DAISY

D– I, I don't care, I-I-I just, I just want someone to hear me.

ARCHIVIST

Well, I'm not going anywhere.

[Daisy's breathing approaches a panicked laugh, and she's not

able to get out more than a few syllables.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

Daisy?

DAISY

I, I want to, but it's – difficult.

ARCHIVIST

Would it help if I – a-*ask*?

DAISY

Y-Yeah, yes, alright. Do your… thing.

ARCHIVIST

(pain) Right. *(he clears his throat)* Uh…

[The Archivist's static begins to build.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

How are you feeling?

DAISY

Scared. I, I'm, I'm, s-scared. I've been scared the whole time here. Not just when it – when it's – cr-crushing, w-when it f-fills your – your mouth with – with di-dirt. *(pause)*

It knows when to stop. W-When to e-ease back, so you don't – don't lose it, or grow numb. L-Leaves you terrified for when it s-starts again, and when it does, y-you're, you're s-scared it'll – *(sniff)* never – never stop.

(on the brink of crying) I thought – thought I'd *(breath)* I'd ne-never see the sky again, never – *(close to breaking)* never s-see Basira – *(she composes herself)*

But – But – But now – you – you've got out of, of, of other stuff like this; maybe, maybe you'll get out of this, and, and then take me with you. *(heavy breathing)* But I don't know what I'll be out, outside. *(pause)*

The-The Hunt, it can't reach me here. I'm s-scared, but – mm – *(straining sound)* But I – I feel more – feel more me… than I have for *years*. Maybe all my life. The Hunt was me – *(strain)* But I don't – I don't think I liked it. I think it just made me – *need* it. *(strain)* I hurt. A lot of people. And some who – who I shouldn't have. *(effort)*

Did you ever hear the story Elias told me? About what I – did. How I am. He – He didn't get a detail wrong. The Hunt. Hunger was in me all my life. Telling me who to chase. How to hurt them. *(heavy breathing)* I never needed to think. Who I was outside of that.

But down here, where I-I can't hear the – blood, anymore. I, I don't – I don't know who I am without, without the chase. I just know that I – I don't like who I was, back outside. I don't want to be her again. I want – to be – *better*. *(breathing)* Mmm – *(more breathing)*

Y-You know what I thought, when I woke up here? I thought this was *hell*. I wa– I was dead, and I was in hell. And I – *(sob)* I knew I deserved it. *(strain)*

I don't want t-to b-be a s-sadistic predator again. I-I don't want to hobble around like some – *pathetic* wounded prey either. I don't know which would be worse. But I'm sc-scared now. That I won't ever get the choice.

ARCHIVIST

(pain) One thing I've learned, Daisy, is that we all get a choice. Even if it doesn't feel like one.

[Pause.]

DAISY

I was gonna kill you. You know that, right?

[The Archivist laughs, as much as he can, current situation considered.]

ARCHIVIST

I mean, I definitely got that impression when you *(pain)* dragged me into the woods for an execution.

[Another sound of pain.]

DAISY

No. *(heh)* No. After the mission. I was planning to kill you.

ARCHIVIST

I… I did not know that.

DAISY

I realized – you were in my dreams. R-R-Reliving – this. T-The coffin. You were *there*.

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

DAISY

Didn't think it was real. Not really. Just my mind putting you there, because I *hated* you, but no. One night, you turn up in a new shirt. Didn't fit you. Not your style.

(shaky breath) I-I didn't think much of it, just a-a dream. Then you come back from the States, and guess what you're wearing.

ARCHIVIST

Oh.

DAISY

(overlapping) Realized what was happening then. Realized you

weren't human. Needed to die, as soon as it was safe. Never mind Elias, and his… *insurance*.

ARCHIVIST

And now?

DAISY

Don't know. I-I miss dreaming. You don't sleep, down here.

ARCHIVIST

Daisy – you should know, I'm –

(he chooses his words carefully)

I-If I wasn't human before, I'm, uh – I'm even less now.

[In the background, the rumbling sound of the Buried and choral hum of the coffin in the rain begins again.]

DAISY

Yeah. Well. At the moment, I don't care.

ARCHIVIST

And if we get out?

DAISY

But we can't get out.

ARCHIVIST

No.

[The Archivist cries out again as the wrath of the Buried comes back full force. Daisy does not yell, but her breaths get even more laboured.]

DAISY

I'm s– I'm sorry. I'm sorry, John. I'm sorry.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The Archivist lets out a breath of surprise.]

ARCHIVIST

D-Daisy!

DAISY

Uh – I'm, I'm here.

ARCHIVIST

I – I can –

[The Archivist's static begins.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

It's – It – It's closer.

DAISY

What is?

ARCHIVIST

M-My, My, My anchor, my – the,

[The Archivist's static rises.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

a rib; I can f– I can feel – I know the way.

[Various gasping noises that may also be "wh–"s from Daisy. The Archivist begins to move.]

DAISY

W-What? H-How?

ARCHIVIST

I don't – *(strain)* It's like – *(strain)* My – my link is – stronger.

[More straining and grunting as they move. The static grows louder, heavier.]

DAISY

(breathing heavy) Slow down. I-I can't –

ARCHIVIST

Don't let go. *(effort)* Come on. We're close. This way.

[They continue.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

Here! Here, come on – push!

DAISY

I – I *am!*

[They both groan loudly as they heave against the coffin lid, pushing it open. As they do, and the Archivist sighs in relief? Contentment? numerous voices overlap in the background, seemingly all talking at once, speaking over each other as if they're in a very large crowd. The Archivist's static fades out.]

DAISY

Wh– We're out! We're really out! I can't believe –

ARCHIVIST

Umm…

DAISY

What? What is it?

ARCHIVIST

Tape recorders. Must – must be *dozens* of them.

[The door opens.]

BASIRA

John, you *stupid* idiot! What did you think—

DAISY

(soft) Hi.

BASIRA

Oh my god.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG133 – Dead Horse

Statement #9302706

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

DAISY

You sure?

ARCHIVIST

(surprised) No, uh, it's, um – it's fine.

DAISY

It's just – Basira's busy.

ARCHIVIST

No, I-I understand. Ho-Honestly, uh, I'd actually appreciate your insight, uh, for this one. Just – you know. Keep quiet during the statement and that.

DAISY

Sure. I-I can do quiet.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Uh, oh – do you want a chair?

DAISY

No.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Okay.

DAISY

I'm trying to get my legs right again.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, of course.

DAISY

Just ignore me. I'll stand in the corner.

ARCHIVIST

O*kay* then. Statement of… *(clears throat)*

Statement of Percy Fawcett regarding his final expedition into the Amazon. Original statement given June 27th, 1930. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Tell nobody I am alive. I cannot be clear enough on that point. Do not try to find me after I have left. Please. All I ask is that I be allowed to live what life I have remaining in obscurity and anonymity.

I will not allow myself to be found.

Perhaps you will have read reports of my disappearance or death, constructing wild theories of violence at the hands of Kalapolos tribesmen, or a lack of adequate supplies or preparation. I can only wish my hubris had been so mundane.

I was hunting once again for the lost city of Z. I have dreamed of it for decades, ever since I read da Silva's account of his own discovery in 1753.

The ancient ruins, the statues, hieroglyphics. The sheer unrivaled beauty of it all. Through the trenches and the mud of the Western front, it was the thought of Z that kept me going, whispered promises of discovery. The remains of an ancient city, utterly lost to time and hidden somewhere near the Xingu River.

My first expedition was alone, save for a handful of indigenous guides. I believed myself prepared, but the realities of that jungle were more than I could have foreseen, and when it finally ended, my fever-addled mind named that spot, the furthest we could reach into the jungle, 'Dead Horse Camp,' because that is where my horse finally fell.

I retreated in defeat, resolved to return to Dead Horse Camp at a

time when I was truly ready. That time was five years later, in 1925, and I honestly believed that this time I was going to find Z. I was more prepared, and crucially, I planned not to go alone.

The Xavante, whose territory we were entering, were said to be violent and distrustful, making a large expedition unwise, so I instead brought my son Jack on board, as he had been traveling with me before, and I trusted his instincts almost as much as I trusted my own.

He, in turn, requested I include one other on the journey, a long-time friend and confidant of his: a man named Raleigh Rimmell.

I never liked the look of Raleigh. He was tall, and his features, though any one of them might have been called handsome, were badly put together on his face, giving him an appearance I'll admit I took against at our first meeting. More than that, he had also read Manuscript 512, and I could see in his eyes the same fervor to find the city of Z as I sometimes glanced in my own.

Although there was something else there as well, behind them. Something darker, that I did not recognize, and I am hesitant to consider it too deeply even now. But Jack saw fit to invite him, and I had never before had cause to second-guess Jack's judgement in such things.

It was Raleigh that suggested that we proceed alone after we left Dead Horse Camp. I had ensured this time we would be well-provisioned. We had horses, dogs, mules, and a pair of local

labourers, who had agreed to act as our guides. But on our arrival at the camp, Raleigh dismissed them, and started to move all of our supplies onto only a few of the animals.

He told us we would have to be quick if we were to find what we sought, and we couldn't do that with a trail of animals behind us.

He used that word a lot, 'quick.' I tried to explain to him that a methodical search would be more effective, but he just continued to mutter it. Eventually I relented. Much as I was going to dislike Raleigh as a person, he raised *(sigh)* several good points about our chances of avoiding any sort of confrontation with the Xavante, and Jack was quick to voice his support.

So it was that at the death of May, myself, Jack, and Raleigh set off deeper into the jungle. Alone.

That night the mosquitos were out in force, thick with fever, and hungry for our blood. I did my best to simply ignore them, safe as I was in my net. But over in Raleigh's tent I kept hearing a sporadic thumping, or clapping sound, as if he were killing them with his bare hands. When I asked him about it the next day, he simply told me he had inside him a strong and enduring hatred of bloodsuckers.

Jack nodded, as if the statement were in some way profound, but I didn't know what to say to it.

That was the day we found the stone. Half buried, worn almost completely smooth by time and exposure, but still clearly covered in those same hieroglyphics as I had seen in da Silva's manuscript.

I was overjoyed, almost to the point of weeping: I had been right.

Jack clapped me on the back and started making some sketches of the symbols. Raleigh was silent, staring at our discovery with a look I'd never seen before. He didn't blink for almost two minutes. Then, he gradually, painstakingly, lowered his head until his face was right next to the rough stone surface. He took several long breaths, as if sniffing the thing. And then I thought I saw his tongue shoot out, just for a moment, and taste the air around it.

Without a word, he took off into the jungle at a dead run. Myself and Jack, startled for a moment, quickly followed. Raleigh was quick, but the uneven jungle floor and terrain made moving difficult, so we were able to keep him in sight until he stopped short.

I caught up with him, breathless from exhaustion, and asked him what in God's name he thought he was doing.

"We're close," he said. "I can smell it. I *won't* let it get away again."

I told him I didn't understand, that we were looking for a ruined city, that it couldn't "get away." But Raleigh just repeated himself: "I can smell it," and to my dismay, I could see Jack nodding along.

This was where things started to turn, and my memory begins to fragment. I kept a journal, but the entries… were sporadic. And shaky.

The dates no longer make sense; at some point I realized that there

were no animals around us anymore, that the Amazon had become strangely quiet. But I don't know whether this was before or after I found the pile of dead birds in Raleigh's tent. It must have been before, but my journal is not clear on the matter. What I do know is that we kept going deeper, and deeper, into the jungle. Jack had taken over the compass and sextant by that point, and I had little idea where we were actually going

Raleigh no longer slept, of this I was sure, and the inconvenience of setting up camp was clearly starting to grate on him.

I no longer had any fear of meeting the Xavante, as I somehow knew that, wherever we were, it was no longer in territory they would want to claim.

There were *other* animals, now. I could never get more than a glimpse. But they were not the birds, or the mule, or any of Raleigh's other victims. They were far too sharp for that.

And they were definitely following us.

When we met the second expedition, it seemed like I was the only one surprised. There were almost a dozen of them, fitted with cold-weather outfits and ice-breaking equipment, and they seemed to take no heed of the thick, humid heat of the jungle. They greeted us like old friends, and Raleigh began to ask them what they had found, how their search was going, how many had made it.

I tried to say a few words, but by this point I was so disorientated, so out of step with whatever path the expedition was treading, that

even if they could hear me, it was clear they had no intention of listening. The leader of the second expedition, a man in a thick seal-skin coat, was talking excitedly about their progress, about their hunt for the Northwest Passage, and I realized with a start that this man was John Franklin, famed polar explorer, whose ships, the *Terror* and the *Erebus,* had been trapped in the ice and lost in northern Canada. The crews had disappeared, and many believed that they had resorted to cannibalism.

Of course, that seemed far less of a concern to me at that moment than the fact that John Franklin's expedition had taken place almost a hundred years previous.

There was no way these people could be real, no way they could be *here.* But they were solid enough, and the gleam and obsession in their eyes matched Raleigh's exactly. Jack looked on in awe at both of them.

We were briefly fourteen people, but then the things that had been following us attacked in the night. I awoke to screams and gunfire, the scents of blood and death. Something more cunning than a jaguar tore through my tent, teeth eager to find my throat. And it was only my paranoia, at the other members of the expanded expedition, that had kept my revolver close enough that I survived the struggle.

When it was over and the beasts were dead or driven off, I heard a sound that chilled me more than the vicious screams of the predators: The blood-drunk cheering of the survivors, a sound of

triumph, elation, and cruelty. There were six of us left, and I reloaded my pistol before I returned to my bed.

The world was changing with every day we marched forward, feverishly hunting for a destination I was no longer sure of.

Raleigh hadn't mentioned the city of Z for days, and Franklin at no point indicated any destination other than the Northwest Passage, though he walked through the heart of Brazil.

And now the very trees seemed to be fleeing us, branches and trunks bending away as we passed, save for those that sharpened themselves and stretched towards us. There were *things* moving through the trees now that looked at first like men, but they did not move like them. Their mouths never opened, but I knew there was something dreadful about them.

There was a grotesque absurdism to it all, and I sometimes thought I might burst out laughing, though I knew it would quickly change to sobbing, and I would be exposed. I had felt my safest option was to feign that same obsession that gripped Raleigh, that had taken my son. Though they both seemed to have a clearer idea of exactly what was going on, they didn't question me too closely as long as I seemed to share it.

For all my navigational and cartographic skill, I had not the faintest idea where we were. At times, the position of the sun cast doubt on even the continent through which we traveled. We found Eduard von Toll a few days later. I recognized him immediately, as he had

always been an inspiration of mine, right up until he and his ship, the *Zarya,* had vanished while hunting for the mysterious polar island Zemlya Sannikova. Now, he and his crew were pinning the things that looked like men to trees, with long, iron spikes. They thrashed, and struggled, and a long, bulbous tongue hung from their throats, pinned by the iron of von Toll's men.

"I cannot *stand* bloodsuckers," Raleigh said approvingly, as he conversed quietly with Baron von Toll in French.

Two of the figures pinned to the trees screamed in pain. *They* had no tongue, no distended belly filled with stolen blood. But no one seemed to notice, or if they did notice, no one cared. In the joy of the hunt, they had been seized. And that was that.

And so the expedition began again, with no sign of progress or clear destination, only the pure focus and wild excitement to find… It. Whatever 'It' was, wherever 'It' might be, they would not stop, would never stop until 'It' was found and taken.

The supplies had run out days ago, and it was becoming clear that zeal will only sustain you so far, as one or two of the group began to falter and fall from exhaustion and hunger. They were simply left behind.

The most painful part was Jack, who would spend hours walking beside me, telling me of all the wonders we would see, all the delights we would be part of, when we finally found It. Or caught It. Or killed It. Whatever It might have been. Broke my heart to see

what I had done to him, to know where my path had set him.

When I finally felt my own body give out, it was a relief almost too acute to describe. I fell, and they left me behind.

I awoke back in Dead Horse Camp. Some of the Kalabolos had found me collapsed in the forest and had taken pity on me. I won't bore you with the details of my fevers and suffering, save to say that the shell-shock I received in the Great War was nothing to what I went through after my return.

I have been careful, though. Nobody knows I am alive, and I desperately wish to keep it that way. I am sure, deep within myself, that what Raleigh Rimmell hunted out in that jungle he will never find. He *can* never find.

What those people pursued, what I pursued, doesn't exist, and I dearly hope that no *others* will ever suffer for our obsession. The sooner the world forgets them, forgets me, the better. I just wish I hadn't lost my son to learn that lesson.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

(pause, deep breath) What d'you make of that, then?

DAISY

Dunno. Why?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, well.. you're uh, you're a Hunter, right? Won't –

[Daisy growls a sigh over his words.]

ARCHIVIST

I – just wondered. I've been looking for evidence of a, a Hunt ritual. To see if it was one of the rituals Gertrude stopped. And this is the closest thing I've been able to find.

DAISY

Could've been one. I think.

ARCHIVIST

But it didn't work. I don't even know how it was *meant* to work.

DAISY

No.

ARCHIVIST

But *why?* There was no outside interference, no other powers; even the indigenous tribes who could theoretically have derailed it seemed to stay away. So why didn't it work?

DAISY

I don't – think it was about that.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not sure I understand.

DAISY

Just a feeling. When I was – *(struggles for words)* You know what my least favorite part of a case was?

ARCHIVIST

Police brutality lawsuit?

DAISY

(exasperated laugh-sigh) Arresting them. I hated the handcuffs, the, the *click*. It meant the chase was done, the hunt was over. Satisfying, on a good day, sure, but moreish. I never really wanted it to be over.

ARCHIVIST

Hm. *(inhale)* You don't think the Hunt would let its ritual end. You don't think it would let them find the – culmination.

DAISY

Don't know. Maybe? Sometimes I lost purpose because I let myself get too into it. Gave them openings just because I wanted to keep chasing. Like with you.

[The Archivist hms.]

DAISY

Sometimes *(sigh)* it meant I lost them.

ARCHIVIST

Uh, one of the bits I've managed to decode from Gertrude's notes – it references something she calls the, uh, the Everchase.

[As he speaks, Daisy's breathing becomes a bit heavier in the background.]

ARCHIVIST

You think that might be it, the, the ritual that never ends, because the Hunt's all in the pursuit.

DAISY

I-I don't know. You're the expert.

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) No, no. I-I-I like it; it's a, it's a good theory.

DAISY

Basira said you could just – *know* all this now, anyway.

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) Yeah, it's – I-I can't really control it.

[The door opens.]

ARCHIVIST

Oh.

BASIRA

(surprised) Hey. There you are. You're meant to be doing your exercises.

DAISY

You were out.

BASIRA

You could have done them alone.

[A slight pause.]

DAISY

Sure.

ARCHIVIST

Everything alright?

BASIRA

Yeah – Daisy, could you give us a minute?

DAISY

Oh. *(slight pause)* Should I –?

BASIRA

Yeah, please.

[A soft sigh from Daisy.]

DAISY

Sure.

[She leaves, closing the door behind her.]

ARCHIVIST

Are – Are you…?

BASIRA

John, is that her?

ARCHIVIST

What?

BASIRA

You've had people switch before, right? Replaced.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, s-sure, but –

BASIRA

How sure are you that's the real Daisy?

ARCHIVIST

Uh – I-I'm sure, Basira; tha-that's her.

BASIRA

But do you – *(slight pause)* Do you *know?*

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Why?

BASIRA

Hm.

ARCHIVIST

Talk to me Basira; is she – wrong in some way?

BASIRA

No. No, she still sounds like her. Says things Daisy would say, laughs like her. She just seems… lost.

[Pause.]

BASIRA

I want it to be her.

ARCHIVIST

Do you?

BASIRA

’s that supposed to mean?

ARCHIVIST

(sighs) She’s.. trying to keep a clear head. Stay away from the Hunt as much as possible. You… valued her purpose. Her resolve.

(slight pause) The sort of things…

BASIRA

(stop talking) I get it. It’s her.

[Beat.]

ARCHIVIST

We’ve all changed, Basira.

BASIRA

Yeah, I just – I didn't realize she'd change into someone who can't look after herself. *(inhale)* Even without the muscle atrophy –

ARCHIVIST

You were hoping for a defender.

BASIRA

I was *hoping* for someone I can trust to share the load. Because right now, it's all on me.

ARCHIVIST

(inhale) It doesn't have to be.

BASIRA

Hm.

ARCHIVIST

You're not happy she's back.

BASIRA

I didn't say that, John. I will *never* abandon Daisy, and… having her back is… *(she sighs)* But right now she's dead weight, and I need to be able to travel light.

ARCHIVIST

You're starting to sound like Gertrude.

BASIRA

Good. Far as I can see, Gertrude Robinson was the most effective person in this place.

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

That's what Tim said as well.

(pause) Look, I've been where you are.

BASIRA

Have you?

ARCHIVIST

(with vigor) Yes, I have. You're the only one responsible for everyone, the weight of all their lives on your shoulders – it leads to bad decisions.

BASIRA

Yeah, well, when I get myself kidnapped three times in a row, maybe I'll look to you for advice.

ARCHIVIST

Bad decisions, like wasting three weeks chasing dead-ends and false leads rather than talking to us *about the plan.*

BASIRA

I *told* you not to look in my head.

ARCHIVIST

I *didn't.* This one's just me. You've not mentioned anything about where you were, avoided talking about what you might have learned, and that file that you were studying clippings from – empty.

BASIRA

Maybe I found something and I'm not sharing.

ARCHIVIST

You didn't though, did you?

BASIRA

I had good intelligence.

ARCHIVIST

Which you charged off to investigate without telling anyone. You know who that reminds me of?

BASIRA

(inhale) Drop it.

ARCHIVIST

(…sigh) Fine. I don't care if you trust me, but I think I've proven at the very least that I'm *useful.* So use me.

(inhale) Because if you go it alone, you are going to *die.* Even Gertrude worked with people. We make bad decisions when we don't communicate.

[Basira sighs at his last words, loudly and heavily.]

BASIRA

You literally jumped into a spooky coffin without telling anybody.

ARCHIVIST

…Case in point.

[Pause.]

BASIRA

(sigh) Okay.

ARCHIVIST

And give Daisy a break. She was there eight months. *(breath)* I was only in there for three days, and –

BASIRA

Yeah, I know. I just…

ARCHIVIST

What?

[Slight pause.]

BASIRA

Nothing. I've got work to do.

[The Archivist sighs deeply as Basira leaves the room, door opening and closing with her.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG134 – Time of Revelation

Statement #0060122

[INT. ????]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

MARTIN

Right. *(inhale)* Martin Blackwood, archi–

[He stops. Sighs.]

Assistant to Peter Lukas, Head of the Magnus Institute. Recording statement number 0060122. Statement of Adelard Dekker,

[He seems to falter, slightly, when he says the name, possibly in recognition.]

taken from a letter to Gertrude Robinson, dated 22nd January, 2006.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

Gertrude. Sorry I can't be there in person to go over all this with you. I – still have a few things to clear up over here.

But I thought it would be best to let you know as soon as possible. I am now certain my theory is correct. There is something new emerging. A fifteenth Power.

I didn't want to believe it either, not at first, but I was alerted a few months ago to the case of a woman named Bernadette Delcour. She works at the Faculté de Théologie, in the University of Lyon, and is an expert in eschatology, specifically failed apocalypse predictions. She had an encounter I believe is directly connected to the new emergence, and I managed to track her down. She was reluctant to talk, though I eventually managed to get the story out of her.

Bernadette had, apparently, received a call from a colleague in Paris about a discovery regarding Garland Hillier. Now, Hillier was a member of the Millerite movement, in upstate New York during the early 1840s. I don't know how familiar you are with the Millerites, but they would eventually grow into the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

They followed a preacher named William Miller, who believed he had calculated exactly when the end of days was coming, and pinned it down to October 22nd, 1844.

Now, Gertrude, I'm sure you'll have noticed that date came and went without any sign of Jesus returning, and Miller's followers noticed the very same thing, calling it "The Great Disappointment." Most of his followers stuck with him, and gradually turned into the Seventh-day Adventists, but Garland Hillier apparently took it harder than most, abandoning the movement and returning to his

native France the following year.

He spent the next *twenty years* publishing widely derided collections of poetry, as well as essays on belief and atheism that were roundly ignored by the philosophical salons of the time. He was supported by several literary friends, as he was reputedly a gifted editor, even if his own work was often all but incomprehensible. Garland Hillier's final essay, published in 1867, and simply titled *"L'Avenir,"* "The Future," was supposedly a rambling and meandering speculation on the end of the human race, influenced by Darwin's recent publication of *The Origin of the Species,* and his own shattered faith.

He posited a future where, far from any glorious or holy revelation or reckoning, a decadent and corrupt humanity was violently and utterly supplanted, and wiped out by a new category of being. One he referred to as "*Les héritiers.*" The Inheritors.

He gave no details on how he believed they might look like, or how they might behave, but his predictions for the final days of humanity were unpleasant and visceral.

The piece was not popular, or widely distributed at the time, and has, for the most part, been utterly forgotten by history. I've been unable to find any accessible copy myself, and have had to rely largely on Professor Delcour's recollections of its contents, as she has the dubious distinction of being one of the few academics familiar with Hillier's work.

Anyway, the point is that sometime after that essay was published, Garland Hillier disappeared. Exactly when this happened, no one is really sure, but the last records of his existence can be found near the end of 1867. No contemporaries commented on his disappearance, nor was there any search inquiry. But neither is there any record of his death or indication of emigration or travel.

Despite his *dubious* academic credentials, he was apparently a man who consistently attempted to court the public eye, and his disappearance has long been a puzzlement, if not a full-blown mystery, in certain academic circles for a long time.

So it's probably not surprising that when Bernadette got a call from Paris telling her that some workman had discovered Garland Hillier's apartment, it got her on a train almost immediately.

And it certainly was a discovery, in the most literal sense. On the fifth floor of an apartment building on the Rue Lagarde, near the Panthéon, some construction workers had uncovered a door that had at some point in the past been completely plastered over. Removing the covering and breaking through the old wood revealed another apartment, one apparently unnoticed by any of the other residents, or, indeed, the owners of those sections of the building, each of which had assumed the space was owned by one of the others, and connected to a different part.

As far as anyone was able to determine, the apartment had been sitting there, sealed and undisturbed, for almost a hundred and fifty years. It was untouched. Pristine. With barely a thin layer of fine

dust coating the possessions and belongings that had stayed there for so long. A few objects identified the place as belonging to Hillier, including a short journal, and so the local authority, baffled as to what to do with this find, had called a history professor from the Sorbonne, who had passed it off to Bernadette, as she was one of the few academics familiar with Hillier.

She went immediately. While the confusion over legal ownership would probably keep the place in limbo for some time, Bernadette was also acutely aware that it meant there would be limited protections in place as well, and she was keen to see it before anything too drastic happened to it.

She got her wish, and her colleague even managed to supply her with a photocopy of the journal, though it made little real sense. It talked of Garland Hillier's 'new revelation,' about the absolute change of the world in terms that seemed at first elegiac, but later seemed – almost panicked, with the final entry simply repeating the words "*La porte est la porte.*"

The door is the door.

Clearly his mental state had been in decline, and Bernadette said she could not help dwelling on the image of this poor man, his whole world shifting and falling away from him, lost and alone in his tiny apartment, gradually losing himself until at last, he lay down, and simply did not get up again.

But that couldn't be the case, she knew, as there had been no sign

of a body.

Bernadette arrived, and got into the building without any trouble, save for the five flights of stairs that needed to be climbed, and found the door unlocked. Monsieur Pinard, who had been supposed to meet her there, was apparently nowhere to be found, so she simply let herself in.

The place felt strange, she told me. Like a tiny pocket of another time. A bubble, where the world had never changed. And stepping inside she almost felt like she would never change, either. Even the light that came through the window seemed to be of a different quality, muted, and gentle. The street chatter of Paris, which usually reaches all but the most remote of windows seemed to vanish entirely. There was a sense of peace to it all, shot through with a strand of disquiet, a wrongness she told me she could not identify, but she could almost smell it.

The objects left within the room itself were, unfortunately, somewhat disappointing. While the clothes and household objects were in a remarkable state of preservation, none gave any insight into the life or fate of Garland Hillier. The bed was unmade, but seemed to hold no clues, and aside from the journal, there were no papers in the place that gave any useful information, save for a few letters from Hachette and the like, declining to print his essays.

All in all, Bernadette described it as intensely disappointing, at least from her perspective, since the only aspect that served to shed any further light on Hillier – his theology or his fate – seemed to be the

journal, something she hadn't needed to spend an hour and a half on the train to get to.

She turned to leave, and that, she says, is when she started to get the sense that something was wrong.

The door had been damaged by the builders who uncovered the place, and there were several distinct gaps in the wood, but as she walked back out, the door appeared to be whole.

She ignored it, and left anyways, trying to reason it all as a strange quirk of memory. Just "one of those things."

Unfortunately for her, it was not the only thing that had changed. The walls of the stairwell were discolored, as though covered with a dusting of some faint yellowish dirt, and the stone steps were ever so slightly sticky beneath her shoes.

There was no sound, no sign of life other than the squeaking of leather as she descended, trying desperately to convince herself that nothing was wrong. That it had been just as quiet on the way up. That this building had always had a thick, humid feeling to the air.

When she stepped outside into the street of corpses, that was when her mind could no longer deny that she was not in any Paris that she knew, no matter what the architecture might have looked like.

There were hundreds of them, stood in place where they had died. Some fallen, a few kneeling. They were stiff, and desiccated, mummified by some process Bernadette could not begin to guess at,

but that rendered their flesh like tightly packed ash. At least that's what it looked like, as she dared not touch them. Those that had fallen seemed to have *f-fused* with the street, and some of it seemed to have been too close to nearby walls, were embedded within them.

Every single shriveled ashened face was contorted in a scream of agony, every sharp and jutting jaw cracked and twisted in an expression of horror. Of understanding not just of their death, but the end of everything they knew. It was clear that they had been this way for years, if not decades.

Bernadette says she was sure nothing had moved in that dead city for a hundred years. She was mistaken.

I have never envied you your position, Gertrude. I have never coveted your gifts, as I know the terrible costs that come with them. But honestly, trying to get a description of these… things, these… Inheritors from Bernadette Delcour made me wish I could just pull the image from her lips, like you would have been able to. In the end, she would say nothing of them, except that "there is nothing done in the history of humanity that deserves the things that come after us."

She was more precise on her escape. Remembering Hillier's words about the door, she had just enough time to retreat back to the apartment and barricade herself inside. Then, she waited until the entrance changed again, and she could emerge back into the world she remembered.

At least – that's my interpretation of events. She was rather agitated by this point in the account, so – I believed it best to leave her to it. I may try to interview her again, later, though I have my suspicions she may find herself disappearing. She has that quality about her; I'm sure you know what I mean. O-of an unfinished meal. And I can only hope that when the second course starts, she can find her way back to Garland Hillier's apartment once more. But of course the evidence suggests that, in the end, even he wasn't able to.

Now, I know what you're going to say, Gertrude. Odd doors are a sign of the Spiral; empty worlds tend towards the Lonely; and eschatology is almost literally the study of the End.

But this is different. I feel it. This fear is new. This is a fear of *extinction.* Of change. It used to be part of the End, perhaps; when the end of humanity was to be the end of *all* things. But now – th-the fear is not of a rapture or a revelation. It is of *catastrophic* change. A change in our world that will wipe out what it means to be us, and leave something else in its place.

Mankind will warp the world so much it kills us all, and leaves only a thousand years of plastic behind. Technology will strip us of what it means to be human, and leave us something alien and cold. We will press a button that in a moment will destroy everything we have ever been. Animals are witnessing the end of their entire species within a single generation. These are new fears, Gertrude, and a new power is rising to consume them. The Extinction. The Terrible Change. The Future-Without-Us.

I know you don't credit my theories, and I'm sure you'll have plenty to say on this one, but I'm going to need your help with this at some point, I'm sure of it. I don't know how you can stop the birth of something that has no life, or mind, or… *substance,* but if anyone can figure it out, it's you. I've never met anyone so gifted at understanding that – strange dream-logic of the fears, and if what I suspect about this new power is true, it could be *catastrophic.*

Until then, *(inhale)* I'll keep searching for evidence, *(sigh)* trying to find instances and manifestations of the Extinction.

I'll keep you updated. Stay safe.

Adelard.

[Martin sighs, statement over. Immediately, from the distance, the signature static of Peter Lukas roars in.]

MARTIN

So that's it, is it?

PETER

It is.

[A couple of footfalls in the distance coming closer.]

MARTIN

A new power.

PETER

The Extinction, yes.

MARTIN

So – *(sigh)* – so what, you're afraid of the competition?

PETER

Not at all. Honestly, that's the sort of thing I normally relish; I've always been a little bit of a gambler, and the higher the stakes the better.

MARTIN

So – So this is, what?

PETER

This is different.

MARTIN

(sigh) I'm listening.

PETER

Good. It's about time.

[Martin exhales.]

PETER

There are two powers that, to my knowledge, have never attempted to fully manifest. Never had followers set them up for a ritual. Mother of Puppets, and Terminus. The Web and the End.

The Web, I've never really been sure about. If I were to guess, I would say it actually prefers the world as is: playing everyone against each other. And so on.

The End, on the other hand… The End doesn't really need one. It knows that it gets everything eventually, so why bother? The End manifesting would not be a new world of terror; it would be a lifeless world. Devoid of everything.

MARTIN

Including fear.

PETER

Exactly. It has no reason to truly attempt to enter our world; it's – *passive.* But the Extinction… The Extinction is… different. It's – active; it will seek to *create* a lifeless world, in a way that none of the other powers ever would. Some interpretations suggest it might replace us with something new – that can then fear annihilation in turn.

But I, and those like me, would rather that did not happen.

MARTIN

S-S-so, what, you want to – stop it being – *born?*

PETER

I don't know if such a thing is even possible, but if it is, then yes. Or at the very least weaken it.

MARTIN

Okay, m, okay, so – so let's say – for now – that I believe you. *Hypothetically.* Wh-what does this have to do with me?

PETER

I'm still working out some of the kinks, but I believe I have a plan. However, it requires this place, and it requires someone touched by the Beholding. Elias was, perhaps unsurprisingly, unwilling to help.

MARTIN

(unamused) And you thought that since I'm *so* lonely already, I'd be ideal.

PETER

Yes!

MARTIN

You see – The thing is, Peter, I'm still *not all that keen* on being a part of any ritual you set up. You know – In *fact,* if I were to be blunt, I'd say that it would be *suicidally stupid.*

PETER

(patronizing) Martin. It's going to be decades, if not centuries, before I get another chance to bring Forsaken into this world. *(deep inhale)* Your last Archivist saw to that. Honestly, if Elias hadn't killed that woman, I'd have been very tempted. I warned him she was danger, but he was always –

MARTIN

(overlapping) Peter, Peter!

PETER

(low) Anyway. (normal) The point is that yes, obviously, if I last that long, I'm going to try again. But I'm rather keen for the world not to end in the meantime?

[Martin hms, lets out a long sigh.]

PETER

Martin, this is what we agreed. After the Flesh attacked, you – came to me.

[Martin sighs again.]

PETER

And I've held up my end of the bargain, despite your continued

hesitation. Your friends have been largely untroubled by the many, *many* enemies that they have made.

MARTIN

What about the delivery guy? Breekon. *And* the coffin!

PETER

Was that its name? To be honest with you, I thought it was dead.

MARTIN

You *thought* **wrong.**

PETER

True enough. And as soon as I learned it was here, I moved to intervene. But, well, it turns out I wasn't really needed. And as far as the coffin goes, there's not much I can do about a *bull-headed* Archivist –

[Martin lets out an annoyed sound.]

PETER

– who seems hell bent on self-destruction. My powers only extend so far.

MARTIN

Mhm.

PETER

Look. I'm not going to pressure you into doing anything you don't want to. It won't even *work* unless you're willing to commit.

In any case, I have plenty of preparations to work on myself before it's ready. I'll see what else I can find to help with your reservations in the meantime, okay?

Just – don't hesitate too long? We are on a deadline after all.

MARTIN

Fine.

PETER

Right. Then if you'll excuse me, I have a family thing to get to.

MARTIN

Are we going to talk about John?

[Slight pause.]

PETER

Do we need to?

MARTIN

I – wh–

PETER

Because to be honest, I'm not entirely sure what's been going on with him these past couple of weeks.

MARTIN

(overlapping) Oh, oh, yeah, *(scoff)* sure.

PETER

Martin. My patron – hopefully *our* patron, someday – doesn't give me any sort of special insights. I'm not quite the accomplished voyeur that Elias was; I have to keep tabs on things the old-fashioned way.

MARTIN

What, turning invisible and *eavesdropping?*

PETER

If you like. But – I'm only one person, and I can't keep an eye on everything.

MARTIN

Or – *anything,* apparently.

PETER

(long sigh, exasperated) As I said, one of the last shreds of the Circus delivered a gateway into Too-Close-I-Cannot-Breathe. I went to

help, but was too late. Then, your detective friend –

MARTIN

(overlapping) No, she's not a de–

PETER

(ignoring) – left on one of Elias's wild goose chases. Then John willfully hurled himself into the coffin. I did not intervene because thankfully, I did *not* agree to protect *your* friends from their own idiocy.

[Martin huffs.]

PETER

Though actually, he gave it more consideration than I thought he would.

MARTIN

He's not a *moron.*

PETER

…If you say so. Regardless, he's in there three days and then what do you know? He manages to pull himself out of the coffin like a grubby Jesus, and he even brings a penitent thief along, in the form of your pet murderer. Does this seem about right to you so far?

MARTIN

Yeah,

PETER

Now, from my point of view, so far, none of this has been any of my business. We have bigger concerns than this little soap opera you call an Archive.

[Disbelieving sound from Martin.]

PETER

What does – puzzle me though, and I mean that genuinely, is – why you were piling tape recorders onto the coffin while John was in there. *(brief pause)* It's a question, Martin, it's – it's not an accusation.

MARTIN

I don't know. And I just – felt like it might help. He's always recording, and I thought it – it might help him… find his way out.

PETER

Interesting. Were you compelled?

MARTIN

I don't know. Maybe? I-I, I definitely wanted to do it.

PETER

But?

[Slight pause.]

MARTIN

I'm – I'm not sure where the idea came from.

PETER

You should watch out for that. Could be something dangerous.

MARTIN

Sure.

PETER

I can't help but notice you're recording right now?

MARTIN

It – was a *statement,* alright; that's what we *do.*

PETER

Anyway. Point is, I'm not your captor or your torturer. I'm not going to tell you to stop talking to him, or even saving him if it comes to it. If that's not a decision you're willing to make yourself, me scolding you isn't going to help.

[Martin scoffs.]

PETER

You know what the stakes are now, and I just have to hope that you're with me on this. Focusing on the big picture.

MARTIN

(resigned) Yeah.

PETER

Okay! Now, I really am running late, so if you don't mind?

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG135 – Dark Matter

Statement #0141407

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Manuela Dominguez regarding her unconventional religious beliefs and their intersection with her project aboard the space station *Daedalus.* Original statement given July 14th, 2014. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I come to you with a warning – and an offer.

When you read this, I would consider it a great favor if you could share my words with the head of your Institute. Tell him that Maxwell Rayner sends his regards and offers – sanctuary.

A time of holy darkness is at hand, when the Eye will close forever, and in the spirit of the friendship they once shared, he offers an opportunity to surrender.

Forsake the Ceaseless Watcher, abandon your position, and you shall be spared in the blind world to come.

In this spirit of reconciliation, and to convince you of our sincerity, I offer my story, much as it may pain me to feed the sick voyeur that lurks in this place.

My parents… were very religious, fueled with a zealotry and zeal that only now I am beginning to truly understand. They believed in the immanence of Christ, descending and purging the Earth of all the inequities and sin that they saw in the world. I was brought up to believe in the light of God, his radiant, illuminating presence, and the promise that he was coming to banish the darkness forever.

It didn't save them, of course, and when they lay there dying, I saw in their faces the fear that they had always denied, the confidence in their own salvation fading with each step closer to the end.

For a long time, I hoped that they had been right about their beliefs. I remembered in my heart that deep down they were vicious, spiteful people who used their faith to hurt others, and I fondly imagined them discovering themselves in an afterlife other than the one they had assumed as their destination.

But I no longer think of such things.

The core of their hatred was for anything they saw as… *unnatural.* For them, God's creation was perfect, and all things in nature were right and proper according to his will.

Of course, there was little consistency in what they considered to be ‘natural,’ and it always seemed to fall along the lines of their own petty jealousies and pride. Anything they did not understand became unnatural, and I found myself crossing that line from an early age, although, strangely, out of everything I was, it was always my desire to pursue a scientific career that they railed against with the most energy.

I saw it as studying the natural world, learning how it worked, mapping it. They saw it as Devil-inspired pride, that tried to know and master forces that were rightfully beyond us.

Regardless, I broke with them as soon as I could, and only returned when they were dying.

Did I come to gloat? Maybe. Though more than that, I wanted to tell them of my own church, to spread the gospel that *I* had found, so they might die with the fear of darkness on their lips.

You see, I do not disagree with my parents’ thesis, that the true virtue of the world is in its natural state. But the natural state of the universe is darkness. Those rank, pompous balls of fire and light vomiting their radiation out into the nothing, they cannot stand against the overwhelming reality of it.

We talk about light and dark being opposites, but they are no more opposites than a gaudy paint is the opposite of the wall upon which is sits. Without light, there is darkness. But without darkness, there is *nothing.* We sit, upon our tiny spinning ball of dirt, desperately

building our own tiny suns, our own illuminating shelters from the truth of existence, clustering around them like insects, never realizing that they rob us of the revelations that come… in the dark. That our wretched eyes bind us to this grotesque world in which we live.

“But Manuela,” they would say, “All life comes from light. The energy that sustains us is drawn from the Sun, from its warm, beautiful radiance.”

And I tell them to look again at ‘life,’ at the pain and suffering and misery that it brings with it. The nature that light gives us is corrupt and base, tearing itself into pieces, spinning to its own sick destruction. The life that is given to us by the stars, by the Sun, can barely sustain itself for a century.

Did you know that the oldest single thing on Earth given life by the light is the Great Basin bristlecone pine tree? Five thousand years, some of them have been alive. Five millennia. That’s it. That’s all. Even the longest lived of the Sun’s children can barely make it a few thousand years. Compare this to the uncountable eternity of darkness, stretching back far beyond when the sickness of an illuminated universe was thrown into existence.

If the words of my parents hold any truth, then God is the true monster, and “let there be light” the most evil words ever spoken.

It may come, then, as a little surprise, that my studies in physics led me towards dark matter and dark energy. My own theology was

undeveloped back then, just the smallest of thoughts, tugging from the back of my mind, a thought experiment I was happy to occasionally indulge.

In many ways, my work back then was a betrayal of my principles, for what is research and study if not doing the work of the light, taking what is true and hidden and rendering it revealed and imperfect. Filtering it through a base and falsifying human mind as surely as the light warps the world around us.

In many ways I suppose my parents were right about it being unnatural. But it was my path to the truth, so I cannot bring myself to honestly regret it.

Dark energy. Dark matter. Dark radiation. The **true** holy trinity.

Almost the entirety of reality is *made* of them, shaped by them, *moved* by them, and yet they remain entirely impervious to the light.

They resist all attempts to measure and expose them, visible only in their effect upon the world, their nature guessed at, seeping through the holes in our knowledge of the cosmos.

All of those things that are believed to be ‘existence’ – matter, energy, radiation – all of them are utterly dwarfed by their dark counterparts. Which leads to an inevitable question: if the fundamental building blocks are so predominantly the dark parts, is it not the light-twisted versions of them that are the deviation, the pale reflection. Perhaps it should be matter and light mater.

But I did not come here to quibble over semantics. I came here to tell you my story, though it has perhaps become my sermon.

No matter. These thoughts, these feelings were always in my mind, and my work in physics only served to deepen them.

But it was not until I met Maxwell Rayner that I realized the deeper truth of it all. He spoke words I thought existed only in my heart, and I loved him as the soil loves the rain.

At first I thought his blindness was a gift, but he rebuked me for such thoughts. “Simply because one cannot feel the heat,” he told me, “does not mean their flesh does not burn. The light is more than simply the source of sight. It is the source of our entire venal half-existence.” And he was aware of it always.

Maxwell told me it is in our nature to fear the dark, and I could not disagree. For all my intellectual reverence of it, I could not deny that those few occasions I had found myself in full and proper darkness, my heart had trembled.

“And rightly so,” he said, “For are we not creatures born of the light, contemptible and corrupt? Surely then, this fear of confronting the pure nature of the universe is right and good. Surely this fear of the dark is the truest communion that humanity could ever hope for.”

And at his words I felt afraid, and my heart soared in terror and elation as my eyes brimmed with tears. For I knew he spoke the truth.

So we began to work together, to worship together in his church, the only church I've ever felt I truly belonged to. It was wonderful. And when he spoke to me of prophecy, of the movement of the heavens and the killing of the Sun, I knew I would do everything in my power to help him.

And I could. More than anyone else on Earth, he said, because of my expertise. That knowledge I had gained in defiance of the dark could finally be put to use. I was to create a focus, a black star, a new centerpoint around which a universe of purest darkness could turn. To take dark matter, dark energy, and harness it, bring it forward into a form that could be held, used… worshipped.

Scientifically, it was nonsense, of course. Dark energy and the like don't work like that, not even remotely. But that wasn't important. What mattered was that it *felt* like science, and that was all I needed; to do my work, to create the black star, would need a parody, an aping mockery of science. But it would also need the deepest of darknesses.

When I told Maxwell what I actually needed, he told me such a thing was impossible. But I insisted. And so he began his work on the *Daedalus*.

I don't know how he convinced Fairchild and the Lukases to help finance the project. A life as long as his is evidently very good for one's finances. But even so, space exploration is a whole other magnitude of expenditure.

I don't entirely know if they were working on rituals of their own, or simply pushing the boundaries of their own fears, their masters. Either way, it was clear my two fellow astronauts were patsies, sent up there to suffer. I almost felt bad for them, but it was in most ways a relief to know I wouldn't need to worry about them interfering with my own project.

Exactly how the launch was arranged, I couldn't tell you, but I assume the calculations must have been done by one of ours. Otherwise, well, weight is very important when planning a launch, and it could hardly have escaped their notice that there were *four* people, in that rocket. Three astronauts, and one unlucky nyctophobe, sealed in a lightless box, silenced, but not sedated, apparently indistinguishable from the rest of the supplies.

I never learned his name, never needed to. He was simply a battery, a ready source of constant terror I could draw on for my experiments. However Maxwell had contrived to stop him screaming seemed most effective, and the closest I ever came to discovery was when Kilbride expressed confusion at the rate that the supplies were diminishing. It was really only the two of us, anyway, with Chilcott sealed away, having his own little breakdown, and Jan was always a bit of an idiot. So ready to believe anyone's lies.

But I suppose I don't need to tell *you* that, do I, Gertrude?

My experiments continued largely uninterrupted, pushing the boundaries of light, darkness, and fear. It was dangerous work, and

more than once I got too close to the light, and it almost destroyed me.

But it didn't.

I could regale you with the technical terms or scientific disciplines I played with and rendered meaningless, but in the end all you actually need to know is that I succeeded. A tiny, terrible sun of the pitchest black, shining beautiful darkness all around it.

By that time my colleagues had long since succumbed to the torments they were assigned, and I had no difficulty storing the Black Star securely, before pulling them onto the shuttle for the return journey.

And then the three of us returned to Earth. Just as well. The final experiment had left my battery in such a state that no amount of soundproofing could dampen the screams, and I was glad of the peace and quiet.

That's all I really came here to say. To let you know that we had succeeded. And to make your boss an offer on behalf of Maxwell.

I suppose there is also an element of provocation here as well. Even with the loss of Darvish, we will still be victorious.

We have watched you, Gertrude. I suppose you're used to that. But we know what you're capable of. So consider this a challenge: I would love nothing more than to see you destroyed by the radiance of the dark sun we have created. So by all means do your worst.

Or prostrate yourself, both of you, before the Forever Blind, and perhaps you might be spared.

Maxwell and I await your decision with keen interest.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

(sigh, shaky breath) Well, that's… concerning. I mean – the Sun's still there, so I assume they failed. Unless they're still waiting to attempt it. That's not the sort of statement you give four *years* before you try to actually – *(laugh turns into a sigh)* Or is it?

The timeframes on these, uh, attempts, the-these rituals, well – *(inhale)* – they seem variable, to say the least.

When I try to think about it, uh –

[We hear the deep, low rumbling of the Archivist's static as he attempts one more time to Behold. He makes a few noises of pain throughout the effort before giving up.]

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) I – It's just… darkness. Unhelpful, but… not unexpected. *(sigh)* I'll keep digging. If there is another ritual upcoming, I'll need all the information I can get on it. I can't believe Gertrude didn't have a plan for it.

I hope I'm just being overcautious, that it's – already long since

dealt with but – *(sigh)* We'll see.

[Short pause.]

ARCHIVIST

At least the coffin's gone. I gave Artefact Storage some – **very** specific instructions, and they've got it solidly sealed away.

Is locking it up the right thing to do? There are other people in there. And Daisy and I got out, but…

No. *(sigh)* I – *(sigh)* I *can't* think about that. Even if I could somehow be sure of recreating our escape, I, I can't save everyone that's been taken. I-It's not my job to try, I – *(inhale)* and I can't spend another three days in there, I just – *(pause)* I need to let it go. *(pause)*

I don't – like interacting with the rest of the Institute these days. The way they look at me, I – I don't know. I don't know what they've heard, what the rumors going around are, but – *(long inhale)* They have definitely heard something. *(exhale)* And they can't wait until they don't have to talk to me anymore.

Can't honestly say I blame them; none of this is easy. *(sigh)* Everyone just trying to get through as best they can. Living one day at a time. *(short pause, sigh)* But I can't afford to be just living one day at a time; I need – a *plan.* But I don't even know what I'm trying to achieve. And no one… *(sigh)* No one wants to tell me.

Hm. *(inhale)*

End recording.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[Pause.]

[INT. PRISON, VISITING ROOM]

ELIAS

Nice to see you again, Detective.

BASIRA

Still not a detective. Never was.

ELIAS

Oh, but everyone else seems to be getting a title these days,

[In the background we hear the sound of the door being opened.]

ELIAS

Ah, why shouldn't you –

[Basira pounds on – the table? The wall? The door? Something rattles.]

BASIRA

Cut the shit. *What* are you playing at?

ELIAS

I'm sure I don't know what you mean.

BASIRA

Like hell you don't. Every lead, a dead end. Every contact, vanished or dead. I spent three weeks bouncing all over the globe on **your** bad intel, because you said there was a way to bring Daisy back.

ELIAS

There was. *(handcuffs rattle)* It required you to be absent.

BASIRA

(sigh) You *wanted* him to go in there.

ELIAS

And you would never have allowed it, had you been present.

BASIRA

Why?

ELIAS

(cheek) Would you simply believe I wanted you and Daisy reunited?

BASIRA

No.

ELIAS

Fine. Consider it a test. Things are – coming, things that will need John to be far stronger and more willing to use his connection to our patron. His performance during the Unknowing was… disappointing. I needed a way to force him to harness his ability more acutely than he had before.

The coffin was a useful tool, Daisy an adequate bait.

BASIRA

Then you messed up. Way he tells it, he doesn't know how he got out of there.

ELIAS

But he *did.* And his powers were no small part of it. Even if he required some assistance, *they* were what saved him. And he has still achieved what no one, mortal, monster, or anything in between, has ever been able to: He climbed out of the Buried.

[Handcuffs rattle.]

BASIRA

But what's the point? You aren't getting your ritual off from in here,

so what do you need him for? *(inhale)* What's so important you need him stronger?

ELIAS

I have been observing a recent increase in people and supplies being moved to the small town of Ny-Ålesund, in Svalbard. An increase which I believe may be linked to a rather desperate attempt by the People's Church of the Divine Host to perform a crude ritual of their own. To bring their… *(inhale, rattle)* Mr. Pitch into the world.

BASIRA

The People's Church? But I thought –

ELIAS

You thought the final death of Maxwell Rayner might have sufficiently derailed them? Yes, that was my hope too, but alas it would seem not.

[Various rattles as he speaks.]

BASIRA

Maxwell… *You.* You called in that tip, sent us out to their warehouse.

ELIAS

And now I'm sending you out again.

BASIRA

(sigh) And why the hell should I trust you this time?

ELIAS

I rather feel the real shame would be letting the entire world fall into darkness because of a single person's wounded pride, *(rattle rattle) Detective.* The stakes are far too high for that kind of… indulgence.

[In the background, we hear some voice, louder than they've been so far, but still inaudible.]

BASIRA

(heavy breath) So what are they doing?

ELIAS

I don't know the details. *(sigh)* Ny-Ålesund is a stronghold of the Dark, meaning I can't see inside. I *believe* they call it the Extinguished Sun, though that's as much as I know. If Gertrude had a plan for this one, I haven't found it, which is why John needs to be *closer* to the Eye. If anyone can stop what's happening, he can, see through the darkness etcetera.

BASIRA

And after all this, you want me to just – take it on faith and ferry John up to Norway.

ELIAS

Have you ever seen the Aurora borealis? It's lovely this time of year. It would be a shame to lose them.

Feel free to do your own research to confirm what I'm telling you.

Just don't take too long.

BASIRA

If you're lying about this –

ELIAS

(can hear the smirk) You'll kill me? I can hardly wait.

[Basira walks off.]

ELIAS

Good luck, *Detective.*

MAG136 – The Puppeteer

Statement #0120112

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST

Uh – not really; I was just going to record a statement. Why?

MELANIE

Well… *(sigh)* Daisy's been, um… I've been keeping her company, uh, while, while Basira's busy. She's, um…

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Oh! No, I, uh, I know.

MELANIE

Well. I've kinda got to… uh. *(inhale)* I've got somewhere to be. Do you mind if – if she hangs around with…?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, I suppose – Not at all. She's very welcome.

MELANIE

Great.

ARCHIVIST

If you don't mind me asking – where are you off to?

[Unfortunately for both of them, the Archivist's signature static rumbles low in the background as he speaks.]

MELANIE

Therapy. *(surprised inhale)* Wait…

ARCHIVIST

Oh – Oh god, Melanie, I, I'm sorry; I didn't mean to –

[Melanie lets out a very annoyed, very "not this again" sigh.]

MELANIE

It's fine. I would probably have told you eventually anyway.

ARCHIVIST

E-Even so, I shouldn't have – I –

MELANIE

(overlapping) Just forget it.

[She sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

It's good though. I-I'm glad you're getting help.

MELANIE

Yes, well. We'll see. *(inhale)* There's a – a lot of crap therapists out there.

ARCHIVIST

I guess. Still. I-It is a good step.

MELANIE

I suppose.

ARCHIVIST

You going to tell them the truth?

MELANIE

I don't know! *(long, steadying breath)* It's all a bit – *(fwoo-phkush sound)* – you know? Uh – C-Can we drop it?

ARCHIVIST

Of course.

[Melanie opens the door and sticks her head out to call to Daisy.]

MELANIE

(to Daisy) Uh yeah, he's – he's fine with it, so…

[Daisy comes in.]

DAISY

Alright?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, uh – are you okay?

DAISY

Yeah.

MELANIE

Right. So, anyway – I'm – I'm running late, so, uh – thank you.

ARCHIVIST

Anytime.

[Melanie leaves, closing the door behind her.]

ARCHIVIST *(CON'T)*

You alright?

DAISY

Asked me that already.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Sorry.

[There's an uncharacteristic casual happiness to his words.]

DAISY

I didn't ask her to do that.

ARCHIVIST

B – I-I-I-It's fine.

[Daisy exhales.]

DAISY

You're not *babysitting* me, alright? I know that's what the others think, sometimes, but that's not it; I just – don't like being on my own if I can help it. You know,flashbacks, panic attacks, the usual. *(breath)* Just trying to avoid it if I can.

ARCHIVIST

I know, Daisy. I – I do.

(exhale) It's hard.

DAISY

Yeah, well. Don't let me get in your way.

ARCHIVIST

Of course. *(clears his throat)* Statement of Alison Killala, regarding her time as friend and carer to special effects artist Neil Lagorio. Original statement given 1st December 2012. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist. Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I loved Neil. I might even have been *in* love with him; it's hard to say. When there are so many emotions caught up in a single person, when they're such a significant force in your life – it gets difficult to say what's really there at the heart of it.

His work, his art, defined my early life, as his friendship defined the last twenty years of it. One of my earliest memories is cowering behind my mother, watching *Labyrinth of the Minotaur* on our tiny television, seeing the clay of the creature move and come alive in stop-motion. It terrified me. It thrilled me. It's a moment that's never completely left me. I've always had two passions: engineering and special effects. So naturally, the course of my life gradually led me towards working on animatronics. I don't – care about the other stuff, not really. A squib's a squib no matter how much you dress it up, and… *(inhales)* makeup never really wowed me. Even pyrotechnics, while… impressive and visually spectacular… They just didn't give me the same sharp joy as making something that could move. That came alive, directed and controlled by *my* hand. I

always felt Frankenstein should have been an engineer, not a medical student, as reading that book I couldn't help but see myself in that obsession.

But I suppose everyone's already done the monster as a robot, haven't they? *(heh)*

And none made it move as well as Neil did in 1975 when he worked on *Agents of Orion*. That was one of his movies that I went back to time and again. The way the robot moved, the weight and life he managed to give each clanking, hissing step. I was fourteen when I managed to hunt down a copy on Betamax, and I just watched that scene over and over again. I was already obsessed with Neil's work by then, mostly his sci-fi stuff from the late 70's – *Beyond Time, Under New York, The Crawling Ones,* all that sort of thing. His earlier stuff I certainly enjoyed, but… for all my fondness for that – animated Minotaur, his stop-motion work never really grabbed me like his animatronics.

The way Neil tells it, he split from his partner Gabe in 1972, and sculpting for stop-motion had never really had the same charm after that.

"Besides," he always told me, "I'm a puppeteer at heart." And that was certainly true. Neil never really talked about his early life, but, sometimes, when the medication was kicking in, he would tell me about his training with puppets.

I could never figure out what performance school he learned at, or

even if he went to one at all, but he would twist his fingers into all sort of bizarre, intricate shapes, until I could see the strings flowing over them.

“We made them dance,” he would say, wonder and nostalgia in his voice. “Oh, how we made them dance.”

Growing up an 80s cinephile and devotee of his art, I obviously had to learn to love horror. It wasn’t just his work with John Carpenter, either. It was common knowledge that Neil was deliberately seeking out darker and – more grotesque works, though no one knew why. *Dead Sky*, *The Nightmare Children*, *Forty Winks* – they were all in this period of his career, which culminated of course with *Toy Shop*. While it’s now regarded as a cult classic, I still remember the editorials of the time condemning it, and some even called it “the end of Neil Lagorio.”

I think it was too late to officially be a video nasty, but it was certainly referred to as such in the UK Press. He told me later that he just needed to get it out of his system, though I don’t know if I entirely believed him.

Whatever the case, my own relationship with him started in 1992, on the set of *Jewel of the Amazon*, a mid-budget effects-driven Kevin Costner vehicle. I’d been working in the industry only a couple of years by that point, and while I’d always dreamed of working with *Neil Lagorio* someday, it wasn’t – quite how I’d always pictured it. The production was rushed, the budget was stretched, the direction was… uninspired, and Neil seemed broadly miserable.

Despite this – or, maybe because of it – we became friends. I think we bonded on that shoot, sheltering from the rain for hours at a time, watching a soggy animatronic jaguar gradually start to rust. I had to fight every instinct inside me, everything that wanted to burst out in admiration for his work and his – profound effect on my life, but instead I chain-smoked and laughed, trying my best to come across as my hero's peer.

What was Neil Lagorio like? The question is harder to answer than I always thought it would be. In so many ways, he was his work.

Conversations were usually about the current shoot, future projects, or the most recent films of anyone he considered worth his attention. He had no time for whatever the issue of the day was, and despised Hollywood gossip and anyone who dealt in it.

I will say that there was no… warmth to him. At all. He was not unpleasant or cruel, but beyond that you may as well have been talking to one of his steel-and-hydraulic creations.

There were two sorts of people in the world as far as Neil saw it: those who were worth his time, and those who were not, and if you were in the latter group he honestly couldn't care if you lived or died. Not that most people could tell which side of the line they fell on. There were even days that – I wasn't sure myself.

Sometimes, I remember, he would invite people over to his studio that I was *sure* he hated, for screenings of his original cuts. I was – quite jealous of this at the time, as I'd never got such an invitation.

But it was probably for the best. I didn't realize it back then, but… *(sigh)* Those guests… *(how do I say this)* …they never quite looked the same afterwards. We stayed in touch over the next few years, even worked together on *The Wire Runner*, his one underwhelming foray into CGI. He even kept in contact when I left to have my baby. It wasn't planned, but while I may not have had much time for makeup and monster suits, the bodies inside of them were a… different matter.

Anyway, even once I'd sorted out childcare arrangements, I found myself… more and more unwelcome, in the industry. It wasn't that people weren't willing to *hire* me – by this point, I had a hell of a special effects resume – but the hours you were expected to be working, the way shoots were set up, the culture of drinking, networking – *(sigh)* – none of it was really possible alongside parenting.

I only really heard about Neil's work from – what he told me. His disappointment at the director's limited vision for the irradiated creatures in *Eagle Falls*, or his satisfaction with his latest – and, as it turned out – last foray into horror, with *The Harvestmen*. He'd always had a fondness for spiders, he told me, and I of course reminded him that harvestmen weren't technically spiders.

It was around that time that he started to suffer his first symptoms. He told me later his greatest regret was not being able to finish his final film, an art house piece simply titled *Dancer*. He never explained what it was about, nor do I think it actually came out, in the end. By the time it was due to start shooting he'd already begun

to seize up.

I became his carer a few months later. It just seemed to make sense. A frugal life, lucrative career, and prickly personality had left him with lots of money but no real support, while my life had left me in a position where I cared deeply about his wellbeing and was in desperate need of money.

Everything just – lined up so neatly.

I will say this once, and you can draw whatever conclusions you wish from it: Neil Lagorio did **not** have Parkinson's disease.

He began to have difficulty moving, yes, but his mind remained razor-sharp at all times, and his growing immobility at no point seemed to cause him any pain, or discomfort. It was simply that, over the course of several years, he stopped being able to move under his own power. The doctors were never able to name it anything other than Parkinson's, and – I'll admit I'm no expert… But I know they were wrong.

When it started, I was worried that Neil would take the loss of his work very hard. It had been all he was for so long, surely being unable to continue would devastate him. Instead, he threw himself into a new project, one I would never have expected, but that suited my engineering background perfectly: Neil had devised a series of frames, ropes, and pulleys, to be constructed in the rooms and corridors of his home. At the end of these ropes were hooks, which slotted into harnesses, again of his own design, that he wore on his

wrists, his neck, his torso, and his legs. When properly built and attached, it allowed me to move him, without a wheelchair or my own support. I could stand him up, and walk him like a puppet.

I protested of course; this man was my *hero*, I *loved* him, and there was no way I could subject him to this – awful indignity. But my objections were ignored, as always, and Neil insisted that this was what he wanted.

So I built that – strange contraption, using the skills I had developed across my whole life, to fill every corner of Neil Lagorio's house with wood and steel and cable. And when it was all done, and I pulled him through his first jerky, standing motions, it did seem to make him happy. Pulling on those levers and cords, moving him step by stiff-limbed step through his house – it was the first time I had seen Neil smile in years.

And so that became our life. For almost a decade, I went to his home every day, strapped him up, and gradually puppeted my idol through whatever strange, parodied version of domestic life he desired.

I still had to feed him, had to wash him, but he would always insist that his arm be hoisted to his mouth before I fed him a sandwich, or that I correctly position him in the bath. And gradually the surreal gave way to the mundane, and it simply became… our life. I barely even noticed when the harnesses were no longer necessary, when the loops for those hooks were now embedded directly into his body. I must have asked him about it, but at the time it just seemed

like – such a natural progression.

It was almost six months ago when the *woman* came to our door. She looked like a film student, and at first I took her for a fan. Neil's work wasn't the sort to attract adoring masses, but occasionally admirers would find their way to his home. Usually he'd send them away, but sometimes he'd have them wait in the atrium while I positioned him in his studio, ready for a short meeting or Q-and-A session.

I was about to ask her to wait while I checked with him, but as I started to speak she turned her head, revealing a mass of white thread criss-crossing all over the side of her temple, standing starkly against the dark brown of her skin.

She told me to sit down, and I did. I heard the levers and pulleys move behind me, and I could tell that Neil was being walked down the corridor towards this woman, but I couldn't see. I couldn't turn my head. So I don't really know what his reaction was. But it didn't sound like one of fear, or despair. He called her 'Annabelle,' and she sent me to his screening room. She told me I was to watch his original cuts. "Just until we're all done here," she said.

And as I walked away from Neil, the last time I saw him alive, he was dancing, the cables shifting and moving him in a graceful, sweeping ballet. And he was crying with joy.

I don't know how long I was watching those films. I don't – It was hard to keep track of time. According to my daughter, I was missing

for five months. When Annabelle let me out, Neil was dead. He was hanging there, wrapped in his strings like a cocoon, twisting gently around, and around, and around.

She told me to take the films, *his* original cuts. She told me to come here. She told me to give them to you. I resisted for some time, but I'm done now. She's won. And I'd – very much like to go home.

ARCHIVIST

(sharp intake of breath) Statement ends. *(exhale)* Hm. Neil Lagorio. You ever see any of his work?

DAISY

No. Not really into films.

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Mm, they were… Well, let's just say it's not a complete shock there was something unnatural to them. Didn't know we had copies in the Institute, though, let alone original cuts.

[He laughs.]

ARCHIVIST

Records indicate they ended up in… *(paper flips)* Artefact Storage.

DAISY

Probably best they stay there.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. *(inhale)* Yes, of course.

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

Annabelle Cane, though… She worries me – I – I don't know. This is the second time she's turned up, uh… Peripheral to the Institute?

DAISY

That you *know of*.

ARCHIVIST

Meaning what?

DAISY

(sigh) She's Web. Spider's sneaky like that. Like that lighter you're always using; where'd you get that?

ARCHIVIST

Mm. Good point. We should keep our eyes open. Anyways – How's Basira doing? I haven't seen her much since – *(inhale)* Well, she seemed a bit *tense* the last few times we spoke. *(cautiously)* How are you guys doing?

DAISY

(overlapping, clears throat) N-No, Basira she's – she's been good. We're together, so it's good, *(sigh)* if she didn't keep treating me like a china doll. *(inhale, exhale over speaking)* But it's alright.

ARCHIVIST

That's understandable, I suppose.

DAISY

(sigh) Yeah, well – *(sigh)* What do *you* think? You think I'm weak, just – *(sigh)* – 'cause I'm not already chasing the next kill? You think I'm less me?

ARCHIVIST

I – *(sigh)* I don't feel like I'm exactly in the best place to judge the… intersection between free will and humanity. *(stuttering inhale)* I'm still trying to figure that out myself.

DAISY

John… When you went in the coffin, was it *you* choosing to do that? Did you *actually* think you could save me, or was that something telling you to do it?

ARCHIVIST

It was me. I was – drawn to it, I'll admit, but it *was* my decision. It wasn't entirely about you, though.

[He sighs as he says those last words.]

DAISY

What was it?

ARCHIVIST

My – *(large sigh)* My memories of the coma are not clear, but I know I made a choice; I made a choice to become… something else. Because I was afraid to die. But ever since then, I – I don't know if I made the right decision; I'm stronger now, tougher, I can – *(he cuts himself off)* If I *do* die, now, or get sealed away somewhere forever? I don't know if that's a bad thing. And I don't want to lose anyone else, so if I can maybe – stop that happening, and the only danger is to *me*, I – I'll do it in a heartbeat; worst case scenario, the universe loses another monster.

DAISY

That's messed up.

[The Archivist lets out a laugh.]

ARCHIVIST

(inhale) Yeah. I suppose it is.

DAISY

Did you *know* the coffin wouldn't kill you?

ARCHIVIST

I – guess I thought imprisonment wouldn't – wouldn't be as bad as it was.

[Daisy sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

And it's a lot easier to make that choice than it is to actually endure the result; you might have noticed when I was in there with you I… I had regrets.

DAISY

Yeah. I remember.

ARCHIVIST

Plus I thought – *(pause, small sigh)* Well, I didn't know what being down there had done to you.

DAISY

(slight intake of breath) You thought I was gonna kill you?

ARCHIVIST

It was a possibility.

DAISY

Guess so.

[A short pause, silent but for the Archivist's breathing.]

ARCHIVIST

Daisy.

DAISY

Hm?

ARCHIVIST

It, uh – hm – Is it, uh – Weird question, but – I – *(sigh)* I haven't seen you in my dreams? The last couple of weeks?

DAISY

Oh, ah – *No*, I – I work here now. Figured it seemed to protect the others, so –

ARCHIVIST

Oh! Right, so you – wait, did you talk to Lukas, or…?

DAISY

(overlapping, hah) Broke into Elias's old office, found an employment contract, filled it in, and signed it.

ARCHIVIST

And that worked.

DAISY

Seems so.

ARCHIVIST

And you're not… worried about –

DAISY

Basira's trapped here. So are you. Not like I'm going anywhere anyway.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose not. So… *(sigh)* No more dreams.

DAISY

Not of you and your *weird* eyes. Just the coffin.

ARCHIVIST

Is that better?

DAISY

(fierce) It's *mine*.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

DAISY

You need to stop moping.

ARCHIVIST

(the picture of Edwardian offense) I *what*?

DAISY

You need to stop swanning around, being all sad.

ARCHIVIST

I – I'm not *swanning around* -

DAISY (OVERLAPPING)

"Boo-hoo, I'm *so alone* and a *monster*."

ARCHIVIST

I *am* alone. Martin is –

DAISY

Busy doing paperwork. Not like he's dead. Besides, he's not the only other person here, you know. There's me, Melanie, Basira –

ARCHIVIST

Traumatized, traumatized, and paranoid because of me.

DAISY

(give me strength) Get over yourself! You're always talking about

choices; we all made ours. Now I'm making a choice to get some drinks in. Coming?

ARCHIVIST

(wha?) I – I don't – I – *(slight pause, he grapples with the concept of friendship)* Yeah, okay.

DAISY

Melanie's out. But I'll go get Basira.

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) Is she – W-Will she want to join us?

DAISY

(darkly) If she doesn't, I'll rip her throat out.

ARCHIVIST

Uhhh…

DAISY

It's a *joke*, John.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Haha! *(soft)* Yes. I – I-I'll get my coat.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. THERAPIST'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

THERAPIST

Right, have a seat.

[Immediately, we notice a large rush of background noise. It's not obvious what's making it up – it's very condensed – but it's definitely there. The therapist herself sounds very pleasant.]

THERAPIST

Do you mind if I record our sessions?

MELANIE

I do mind, yes.

THERAPIST

Ah, I mean, it's just for my own notes –

MELANIE

I categorically, and completely, do *not* give consent for you to make *any* recording of me, **ever**. Turn it off. Please.

THERAPIST

I – I see. Yes, of course.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG137 – Nemesis

Statement #9550307

[CLICK]

GERTRUDE

Case 9550307, Wallis Turner. Incident occurred at the North Point prisoner-of-war camp, then later the sunken ship Nemesis, in late 1942. Statement taken 3rd of July, 1955 at the Pu Songling Research Centre, Beijing. Committed to tape 9th of October, 2014. Gertrude Robinson recording.

GERTRUDE (STATEMENT)

I always knew what sort of a thing war was. Even when everything was going to hell, even when it just plain stopped making sense, and what I was seeing and hearing was obviously ghosts and monsters – even then it still didn't surprise me. Not really.

I never wanted to join up, never cared about fighting for my country. I mean, what, like my country ever fought for me? No. No government ever gave a damn about me, and I didn't feel like I had anything needed paying back on that front. Add to that, I was terrified. I'll admit it, the thought of marching off to war set my whole body shaking, and I can still remember the nightmares I had when I got the notice.

I was half an inch from going conchie – going to prison and taking my lumps – but in the end it was my dad that pushed me into the uniform. And it wasn't an argument or telling-off that did it, either. He just looked so damn proud when I told him. His son, the soldier. Don't know if I'd ever seen him look at me like that before. And I just didn't have the heart to break it. Me going conchie would kill him, so I had to learn to kill others.

And that's the thing that really scared me, you know? I wasn't scared of dying, not really. Everything dies in the end, and the chaplain says you end up with God. Who am I to say different? Even if it's just sleep, just a quiet nothing forever, it's not like you know enough to be bored, is it? No, death ain't scary.

But killing, that's scary. To look another living thing in the eyes and end it forever, strip away everything they could have been, could have done, or felt – nobody should ever have to do that. Sergeant once told me it's no different from killing a chicken back home. But people aren't chickens, and the idea that war strips us all down to just a body, that moves and kills, or falls and dies, makes me feel sick to my stomach.

I don't like killing chickens, either. But none of my feelings mattered in the end. I got the uniform, the training, and the gun then ended up shipped off to the Pacific to fight the Japanese. I've got no desire to share the details of my service. They're not memories I care to dwell on, and they're certainly not why I'm here. Let's just say that neither my noble comrades-in-arms nor the soldiers fighting for His Majesty the Emperor seemed to share my

lofty ideals about the sanctity of life. Still, I got through a while without dying and even without killing anybody. That I know of, at least. I fired my gun plenty, I guess, and you don't usually see where the bullet lands, do you?

I was captured after about six months and sent to the North Point prison camp in occupied Hong Kong. At the time it seemed like a relief, but then I hadn't heard the stories about how the Japanese treated their POWs. I mean, these days after the Tokyo trial and everything, I, I guess everyone knows how bad it was. But I didn't have a clue when we first surrendered.

The things people will do to their fellow man, just because someone with a shinier badge tells them to. And even then, our treatment was a picnic compared to the Chinese prisoners who came through North Point. But again, that's not the point, and I have no interest in dwelling on the suffering. Plenty of others to tell those stories, if you want them.

I was in that place for four months – four months of hell. I know others who were in there a lot longer, and I sure don't envy them. Though the way I got out wasn't exactly ideal.

Leonard was the one who heard it first. He was the closest thing I had to a friend in that place: Leonard Holden, built like a barn, and about as complicated. He'd worked on a farm before signing up, and sometimes it seemed like that was about the limit of what he thought the world was. At least until the rest of the world caught up with him. Poor bastard.

We'd been captured at the same time, and the fact his head stuck out above the others meant it was easier for me to stick by him when we were all getting sorted. We pushed through those four months together, me watching him go from a hulking farm boy into a scrawny beanpole of a man. He never lost his smile, though. Not until he heard that music.

It was a cool winter night when it happened. It never got properly cold in North Point, not like back home, but you still ended shivering most of your nights away. There was the lightest of rains that night, when the Nemesis arrived.

We were trying to sleep, pushed into our cramped wooden huts, thin blankets pulled tight. At first, it was a drumbeat – distant, regular, sometimes broken by the rattling role of a snare drum. I could feel my pulse quicken, like it wanted to match the tempo, though I've no idea why.

I should have been confused – scared, maybe, and I guess I was, but I could also feel my fingers tap-tap-tapping away to the beat. Beside me, Leonard started to hum to himself, a tune I could almost half-remember hearing, just before the trumpet began to drift over the waters just a few yards beyond the walls.

I call it a trumpet because that's the closest thing I can think to liken to that sound. But it sure wasn't any trumpet they played on the parade ground. By this point we were all out of our beds and clustering around the dirt-caked windows looking out towards the water. I don't know if any of us had any expectations of what was

going to happen, but unless it was some Japanese military thing, I think we were all expecting to watch some… people… die. And we did, I guess. Just the way we thought.

There was a boat floating out there not 20 yards in the shoreline. It wasn't like any Imperial ship I'd ever seen, but I didn't think it belonged to our side, either. It was metal, but not like the warships I was used to. It was like an old tall ship, with tattered masts and rigging, but made entirely out of cold, black iron. I knew it was cold. It made me cold just to look at it. The whole thing shone in the moonlight, slick with water, as though it had been caught in a rainstorm, and I could see the name written in English on the prow, clear as anything: *Nemesis.*

It had been almost a full minute by now, and we'd still heard no response from the guards. No searchlights, no alarms, no angry shouting, none of the things that usually accompanied any sort of commotion. That should have been a good thing, right? But instead, I just felt this pit in my stomach, like I knew whatever was coming had to be really, really bad.

Just then, I saw figures moving towards the shore. Even in the dark, I could make out the uniforms of our captors, but they weren't moving right. They were stepping slowly, walking to the rhythm of the drum, the swelling of the trumpet. In another life, another… reality, I'd almost have said they were dancing.

They kept going until they stood at the water's edge. I counted dozens of them. It must have been every guard in the camp, or

damn near it. They were still moving around each other, still shifting and stepping to the rhythm of that music, but now something was in their hands, glinting in the moonlight. Our captors held their blades tight, keeping them utterly still while their bodies moved and swayed. Then in a moment, the control broke, and they fell on each other suddenly, each crying out with unleashed ferocity.

One man severed his commander's arm in a single swipe, before being run through the stomach by his former comrade. Two more plunged the points into each other's eyes, pushing forward, driving them in until they both collapsed, propped up, intertwined. It only took a few seconds, and then they were all dead, and the dirt was slick with their blood, flowing down and into the water where the Nemesis floated.

When they were lying still, and the music stopped, the night was quiet again. That's when I heard the sound that *really* chilled my blood: all my comrades, my fellow prisoners, cheered. And it wasn't the cheer of those glad for freedom. It was the sound of bloodlust and cruelty.

Without any fear of the guards, we left our cramped dormitories and filed down towards the ship that all the others seemed to think was our salvation. They walked slowly, almost reverently, stepping over the bodies of our slain jailers. A few bent down, pulling long knives and bayonets from the corpses, not even bothering to wipe the trailing gore from them.

Small boats paddled over from the ship and started to ferry us over. The sailors wore old uniforms, a mess of different navies, different eras. Some I recognized from history books, others were a complete mystery to me. All of them had some telltale stain, or burn, or patch of missing cloth – something that made it clear that whoever was wearing the uniform was not the original owner.

It took several trips to transfer everybody to Nemesis, but in all that time, nobody spoke. It was surreal. My whole time as a prisoner had felt like a nightmare, but this… this felt like something else entirely.

They lined us all up on the deck, as if we were mustering for something, none of us dressed or uniformed, a few holding salvaged weapons, waiting to know what was expected of us. And the ship began to sail, out down towards the open ocean, wind and salt cutting through us as we went. My feet felt stuck to the deck, shivering, as we watched this weird mismatch of bloody sailors maneuver this thing that seemed like it belonged to the bottom of the sea. Looking around, I could see the metal was twisted and bent in places, and staring closer at the deck below, I began to notice rust and holes laced through it. There was absolutely no way that this vessel should have been floating.

After an hour, we completely lost sight of the land, and the only things beyond our ship were the rolling black waters and the hollow glow of a full moon. That was when the music started up again. We were so close now, every pulse of the drum shuddered through us.

And the trumpet notes cut through us. I could see now it was made of the same black iron as the ship, and embedded like shrapnel in the hand that held it, the lips that blew into it. Whatever spell had come over the others was gone in an instant, and I could feel the sudden terror flow out of them in a flood of unleashed fear. Some of them started to whimper. Others tried to ask questions of anyone they thought might be officers, but they were ignored, and the music just got louder.

Leonard was the first to dance. Well, I *think* of it as a dance, though I don't know why. He reached over and grabbed another one of the former prisoners, a scrawny guy, I, I think his name was Milton. He gave a cry of anger that I could never have imagined coming from his gentle, smiling lips, even in the heat of battle. There was nothing Milton could do. Even malnourished as he was, it was easy for Leonard to snap his arm like a twig, twist his neck until his leg spasmed and his skull started to crack. Even when his victim was clearly dead, he kept beating it, tossing the corpse across the deck with as much ferocity as if it were the most hated man alive.

The bloody crew of the Nemesis watched, their eyes riveted, and their feet tapping to the music. Leonard's rampage against the now-unrecognizable corpse of Milton only ended when another soldier, whose name I never knew, lept forward with that same cry of violence, and began to stab him wildly with a stolen bayonet. So it continued, hour upon hour of that night, as one-by-one the stolen prisoners succumbed to that music, their silent, frozen terror giving way in a moment to the eager desire to kill.

The crew, hungry for death in their stolen uniforms, at first cried out in joy with each new murder. Then, they cried out with expectation. And at last, with what sounded like concern, casting their eyes up into the empty sky as though waiting for something. As fewer and fewer of us remained, I could feel something like panic begin to spread through them, and I began to see the water line creeping higher and higher up the side of the ship, reaching eagerly to pull the Nemesis back down into its grave.

The whole time, I expected the music to reach *me* – to take me, to seize my heart with murderous purpose. But it never did. Even as the last of the other prisoners began to hack wildly at each other, and the waters started to flow over the sides and around my ankles, I never felt it.

Instead, I broke and ran, fleeing for one of the smaller boats that had ferried us from the shore. The crew did not stop me. They simply watched me with expressions of despair – the deepest disappointment I've ever seen.

The small craft was iron, like the larger vessel, and as the Nemesis sank finally beneath the waves again, I cut the remaining ropes and simply… floated away. I was terrified I'd be picked up by the Japanese, or die out there in the ocean, but as it was, I got lucky, and a few days later was picked up by an Allied ship. I told them my story, just like I'm telling you now. And what do you know? I got to sit out the rest of the war.

I often think about that night. But it's not the blood I remember –

not the black iron ship, or the look on Leonard Holden's face as he pulled poor Milton apart. It's the sadness on the faces of those who kidnapped us. Those who made us dance to their violence. I don't think I'll ever know what they expected to happen. But I think I'm very glad it didn't.

GERTRUDE

Final comments.

Well, that's quite a relief. Nearly 40 years I'd been wondering about the Slaughter's ritual, keeping an eye out for anything that might be stirring. And it turns out I needn't have been worried at all. The Risen War failed a few years before I was even born.

I should have known, I suppose. Few wars in my lifetime have reached anywhere near the heights of fear I suspect this ritual would need – though I did spend some time a while back looking over some details from the Cuban Missile Crisis to, heh, no avail. And all this time, the answer was just sitting in the archives of the Songling Center. Funny how that works, sometimes.

An interesting set of trappings for this one: the Opium War history of the Nemesis, uniforms linking – no doubt – to horrific crimes from every Imperial nation, all placed in the bloody heart of the Pacific Theatre. And Japanese POWs… something to do with attitudes towards surrender and atrocity in Japan at the time? The Senjinkun military code? Not my place to speculate, I suppose.

Still, the anticlimax is fascinating. I can only assume they were

supposed to be bombed at the height of the ritual – maybe by Japanese aircraft, maybe Allied, maybe both. I wonder what stopped it. A Japanese radar filled with spiderwebs, a US destroyer finding itself suddenly alone in the open ocean? Heh. We'll probably never know.

Heh, I suppose… *Hah!* If any of them survived the re-sinking of the Nemesis… God, they must have been *kicking* themselves in 1945! If they had just had a *bit* more patience, waited a few years, sailed her into Nagasaki Harbor instead… Still, none of us can tell the future, can we?

So, that's nice. Another one to cross off the list. Doesn't help with the Unknowing, though.

(sigh) Well, you still have Dekker's back-up plan, of course, but it's very risky. To be sure, I think the detonation would need to happen from within the Unknowing, *while* it was going on. Gerard may have a connection to the Eye, but I'm not convinced it would be enough. And I will admit I've grown… fond of the boy.

I wonder if I told him about Eric, whether he'd follow in his father's footsteps… Still, it's not like it kept Eric safe in the end.

Anyway, point is, you can probably discount the Slaughter. It had its chance.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

So. Funny story. Turns out when Daisy broke the lock to get into Elias's old office… well, she did a good enough job that it's not obviously broken. So, it hasn't been replaced yet.

So, I had a look around. Mostly as I remember, but there's a box of tapes and statements in the corner. Obviously those Elias either didn't feel he could trust me with yet, or maybe just the ones he was checking himself.

Ideally, I'd like to avoid tipping Peter off for as long as possible that I have access, but it turns out I don't Know Elias's safe combination. Not yet, anyway.

So I just took the first one that called to me, and it's… it's good, I suppose. Glad to know I don't need to worry about a Slaughter ritual. Nice to get confirmation that whoever Eric was, he was Gerry's father and, well, one *assumes* Mary Keay's partner.

But nothing with any direction to it. Ever since I crawled out of that damn coffin I feel like I've been… adrift. Filling in blanks and diving into history, but only… The breadcrumbs I'm finding are stale. Old.

What the hell *is* the Watcher's Crown? So far, the only mention of it I've had is from Gerry, and he didn't seem to know much about what it actually meant. And he's gone, now.

But if it is the grand ritual of Beholding then I – I mean, I need to *know* about it. Right? I feel like I'm on a deadline, like I'm running out of time, somehow. And I don't even know where to go, what to look for, or… I'm just casting around blindly for more clues to just drop into my lap. Everyone else is running towards something or running away, and I… I don't know what I'm doing.

I'm just tired. Think I might go lie down for a while. Get a cup of tea. Daisy's got me listening to The Archers. I hate it. But it feels nice to hate something that can't hurt me. I don't know. That's it, I, I guess.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG138 – The Architecture of Fear

Statement #8671302

[INT. PRISON, VISITATION ROOM]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ELIAS

There. Much better.

[His handcuffs jangle as he speaks, and there's the usual prison background noise we've come to expect.]

MARTIN

You know I don't care if John hears this.

ELIAS

Come on, Martin. It's been so long since I've seen you. Let's not start with lies.

[Martin takes a steadying breath.]

MARTIN

(sigh) Fine.

ELIAS

I am **very** pleased to see you.

MARTIN

Mhm.

ELIAS

No time for pleasantries? Very well, then. To business. What can I do for you? Tired of running budgets for Peter? I know I would be.

MARTIN

I'm – I need to – *(inhale, then short hm)* Is he telling the truth?

ELIAS

About what?

[His handcuffs rattle.]

MARTIN

About *any* of it.

[Elias inhales heavily.]

ELIAS

Everything Peter has told you is true.

MARTIN

(huh, really?!) Oh…

ELIAS

For all his… *many* faults, Peter is legitimately trying to stop the end of the world as we know it.

MARTIN

So why haven't you *helped* him?

ELIAS

My relationship to the apocalypse is more… complicated.

MARTIN

(overlapping sigh) Seriously?

[Rattle rattle.]

ELIAS

Seriously. Anyway, I *have* helped him. I've given him control of the Institute, I've provided him with –

MARTIN

Me?

ELIAS

– any manpower he might require.

[Martin scoffs: Yeah, right.]

MARTIN

(increasingly heated) Yeah, but if – if he's right about the Extinction, what it is, then why didn't you *say* anything before; why am I only hearing it about it **now;** and *why doesn't **John** know?*

ELIAS

In my case, while Peter has talked of it before, it was only very recently that I was forced to admit the Extinction is real. And as for our dear Archivist, I'm afraid I no longer have any real control over what he does or does not know, unlike yourself. I notice you haven't told him either.

MARTIN

Yeah, well. I'm still not sure I really believe it. *(long exhale)* A,And I don't… I – I'm –

ELIAS

(rattle) Worried he might charge off into another coffin.

[He makes a smug little sound.]

Quite. *(rattle)* As for why I've done so little about such a looming existential threat, *(sigh)* to be blunt, I have been rather busy.

[Martin makes a sputtering noise that equates to: Yeah, right x2.]

Don't forget, I – *(rattle)* – am still living at Her Majesty's pleasure, due in no small part to *your* actions. So by this point, all I can do is confirm that everything Peter has told you is true.

[Short pause.]

MARTIN

I think he wants me to join the Lonely.

ELIAS

Then it sounds like you have a decision to make.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

What? *(small dry laugh)* That's it? No, no monologue, no mind games? You **love** manipulating people!

ELIAS

That makes two of us.

[Rattle.]

No. This is too important for me to jeopardize with cheap – *(rattle)* – mind games. I simply have to trust that when the time comes, you'll – *(rattle)* – make the **right** choice.

MARTIN

Great! *(small sigh, under his breath)* Great, great. *(to Elias)* So what you're actually saying is that you're gonna be – *no* help whatsoever!

[You can hear the grin in Elias's voice when he speaks.]

ELIAS

Just like old times.

[Rattle.]

MARTIN

I don't know what I expected. *(shaky inhale)* Right, we're done here.

[He starts to walk away.]

ELIAS

Don't forget to keep in touch, Martin. There are so many people in here, but without one's friends…

[Martin unlocks/opens the door to leave.]

It does get rather lonely.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ????]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

MARTIN

M-Martin Blackwood, Assistant to Peter Lukas, Head of the Magnus Institute, recording statement number… 8671302. Statement of Robert Smirke, taken from a letter to Jonah Magnus, dated 13th of Februrary, 1867.

[He clears his throat.]

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

My dear Jonah,

You will forgive me, I hope, for being so forward, but I feel I must break the silence that has characterized our acquaintance for these past few decades.

You see, Jonah, I feel the hour of my death approaching, and,

though you have always been reluctant to pay due heed to my warnings or counsel, I continue to see in you the reflection of my own past hubris. I could not go easy to my grave without offering one last plea for your restraint. What we built at Millbank should be left well enough alone, resigned to the nightmares of the reprobates and brigands contained within its walls.

I have been blessed with a long life, something few who cross paths with the Dread Powers can boast, but now, at the end of it, my true fear is that I have wasted it, chasing an impossible dream. To speak plain, I have begun to lose faith in the possibility of balance, of any sort of equilibrium among them.

It is telling, that of those I have brought into my confidence, it is only you and I who have continued this far without falling to one power or another, despite all my instruction and work. This is, of course, assuming you have not taken the path of the Eye that I *know* has called you, called us both for so long. Even since before we began our work on Millbank.

I suppose I had to believe that the darkened natures of our terror could be kept in check, weighed against each other so that the great wheel would keep turning forever, without reaching the velocity I feared would crush us. Perhaps my sin was to see them as something that could be knowable, and harnessed.

I'm sure you recall what happened with the Reform Club, but you may be unaware of some of my *other* experiments below the very streets of London. Places I have tried to cover with churches, of all

things, in the faint hope that… perhaps the site of our Saviour will be enough to contain them. A rather feeble hope, for my own salvation.

Did I ever tell you about the dreams? I'm sure I must have. I would dream about them, you see, as a young man, long before I devised my taxonomy. I would find myself in nightmares of strange, far-off places: a field of graves, a grasping tunnel, an abattoir knee-deep in pig's blood. I believed then, as I still believe now, that these places I saw *were* the Powers themselves, expressed in their truest form, far more entirely than any "secret" book can claim.

And if, as I came to believe, the Dread Powers were themselves places of some sort, then surely with the right space, the right architecture, they could be contained. Channeled. Harnessed. So yes, hubris. Not simply in that, I suppose, but in believing that those I brought into my confidence shared my lofty goals.

So many have abandoned us, casting about for rituals that I helped design. In my excited discussions with Mr. Rayner, I perhaps extrapolated too much from his talk of a grand ritual of darkness. The Dark, I thought, was simply one of the powers, so it stands to reason that each of them should have its own ritual. Perhaps they already did, even before I put pen to paper.

They certainly do now, and I shudder to think how Lukas, Scott, and the others may use this conception.

Fourteen powers, with their opposites and their allies, each with an

aim no more or less than manifestation. Apocalypse. Apotheosis. I wonder, did my work bring about these dreadful things, or – did I simply develop the means by which they can be known?

I should have realized, of course, when we first discussed the Flesh, for how can there be true balance, each one to its opposite, when new fears can emerge and change as civilization itself grows and alters, when a new power can birth itself screaming from the torn remnants of others?

I know you say the Flesh was perhaps always there, shriveled and nascent until its recent growth, but to grant the existence of such a lesser power would throw everything into confusion. Would you have me separate the Corruption into insects, dirt, and disease? T,To divide the fungal bloom from the maggot? No. No, I – stand by my work, and thus, we must conclude that the only explanation is a *new Power,* created from what was once others, yet also distinct. And if such change is possible, how, then, can any true balance be achieved through immutable, unchanging stone?

I have been dreaming again, Jonah. The same every night for months, now. I imagine myself a boy again at Aspley. I awake, cold and alone in the dormitory. The sky outside is dark, and I see no stars. I light a candle, to better see my way, and step down the silent corridor. The master's rooms are empty, the fire in the kitchen is dead. Eventually my steps lead out into the courtyard. It is so quiet that the sound of my feet upon the grass is painful to my ears. I stop, and look up at the sky, that empty black nothing, and I see the edges of the horizon becoming a dull white. I cannot

understand what I am looking at.

And then the sky *blinks.*

And I awake.

I am not a fool. I know well enough what this dream is likely to mean, and I warn you again, that if you have any remaining ambitions to use our work, to try and wear the Watcher's Crown, you must abandon them! Not simply for the sake of your own soul, but for that of the world! I have always had the utmost respect for you as a man of dignity and learning. Donot allow yourself to fall to this madness.

I have been thinking, of late, about the first origin of the Dread Powers, if such beings can really be said to have true origins. Are they eternal? Or were they created from our own fear by some – grand accident, or, worse, some grand design? I believe the latter to be the case, as you well know, for I have in vain struggled to reconcile their creation with the existence of a loving god.

They are not *demons,* of this I am sure, though we have drawn parallels with their acolytes and certain monstrous figures from ancient myth. No, I feel certain they were brought into existence by some – ancient civilization, some foolish tribe from pre-history.

Do you know of Alexander Cunningham? He's been working with the viceroy of India on the Indus Valley digs, and has discovered some quite remarkable things. Burial pits full of burned bones and ash; skulls with markings, as if the eyes were removed; and others

that seemed buried alive. Perhaps a dying civilization sought to harness its own terror, as we once thought to harness its results.

Of course, such things are pure conjecture. *(long inhale)* I have not brought Cunningham into my confidence on this, nor do I believe there will be any cause to, even if there was still time remaining to me. *(soft hm)* Perhaps you're wondering why I'm so convinced of my imminent demise, and why I should see it as cause to reach out to you, after so much silence and distrust has passed between us. Certainly, you must either wonder, or you already know all too well.

I have been watched for some time, now, since shortly before the dreams began. It was subtle at first, easy to ignore and dismiss. What possible harm could there be in the idle glance of a footman, staring at you as you leave your home? And no doubt the shopkeeper is permitted to watch whomsoever he pleases within the confines of his own establishment. *(inhale)* So I have been reassuring myself, as I attempted to ignore my own growing disquiet.

But what is not to be dismissed is when your driver, on the long road from London, takes his eyes from the horses and begins to turn his head, slowly at first, but with a clear determination, inch by inch without ceasing, neck cracking and skin stretching, until his whole head seems as though it were placed atop his shoulders in reverse by some careless sculptor.

The others in my carriage seemed not to mark this awful sight, but I

could scarce look away, and the eyes of this twisted figure locked on my own, tears streaming from their corners. It was such a dreadful spectacle that it took every ounce of my composure not to hurl myself bodily from the coach.

The journey was not a short one, and for all those hours the driver did not once for a second look away. The horses seemed to take it all in stride.

Since then, I have attempted to avoid such situations, and have traveled primarily by the railway – but, even then, it seems I cannot avoid the ceaseless gaze of those silent figures who gather along the side of the track to stare at me as I pass. I count the billowing smoke as a blessing, for though it sends me into coughing fits, it at least serves to hide me from their relentless eyes.

I am choosing to assume that these manifestations are unintentional, Jonah, and you have not simply decided to implore a dark patron to end the life of an old man. I further find myself supposing that they might emanate from your own intrigues and preparations to culminate those plans which we agreed to abandon so many decades ago.

I beg you, do not pursue this goal; if only a single lesson may be gleaned from my life of long study and longer hardship, it is that the fear of death is natural, and to flee from it will only bring greater misery. Repent of your sins, Jonah. Seek forgiveness. I am certain the Dread Powers cannot take a soul who keeps faith in the Resurrection.

As for myself, I must cling to hope, for I cannot ultimately deny the wavering of my own faith. I have pleaded with the Lord to give me strength, to help shield me from the things I have sought these many decades, to protect me, as my end draws near. I do not believe my prayers have been heard.

Last night I was awoken by a noise from the drawing room. I was in my own bed, and the moon shone through the window, casting the place in a pale and sickly hue, though it was illumination enough to assure myself I was alone. The noise came again, however, and I called out to Laura, asking if she had woken in the night. There was no reply. I struck a match, and lit my meager candle, clinging desperately to its small pinprick of warmth and light, and I crept towards the drawing room.

The door opened slowly, and the room within was in pitch darkness, the heavy curtains having been drawn across the window. In the sputtering glow of the candle, I could see a figure stood in the corner opposite the door. It wore a long nightdress, and seemed at a glance to be my dear, sweet Laura. I let out a breath and began to settle myself, asking her what she was doing out of bed. She did not respond, however. She remained silent instead, facing into the corner of the room.

I approached slowly, that restored confidence fleeing me as swiftly as it had arrived, and asked her again. This time, she began to turn, with such a slowness I was reminded instantly of the driver. I started to speak again, but at that moment my candle went out, plunging me into abject darkness. I fumbled desperately for a

match, and, finding one in my nightgown, I struck it in a panic, casting a sudden light on my surroundings.

Laura's face was inches from my own, her eyes staring into mine, so wide that they seemed to take up half her face or more, bulging grotesquely from their sockets. I screamed. Just once. She gave no response of her own.

I wanted to run, to – lock myself in my room, but under the sight of those horrible eyes, my entire body seemed to freeze, and I stood there, match held aloft, eyes locked with this awful parody of my daughter.

After an eternity, the flame reached my fingers, and I dropped the match, letting the relief of darkness wash over me. I stood there until morning, only to find Laura gone. It was then I began composing this letter.

Laura, of course, claims no knowledge of the night's events, having no memory of even leaving her chamber. The Eye has marked me for something, of this I have no doubt. My humble hope is that it may be a swift death, an accidental effect of your own researches, which I once again implore you to abandon. It is likely too late for me, but I will *not* –

[Martin breaks off, flips the page over.]

MARTIN

Um… He, um… the letter ends there. Uh – apparently Robert Smirke was found collapsed in his study that evening, dead of, uh… apoplexy. Hm. I-I don't know how the letter reached the Archives – I mean, *(noncommittal sound)* I can *guess,* but…

So. So what; what does it mean? Am I supposed to be reassured that new entities can be born, that there's some – some kind of *precedent* for the Extinction?

(slight pause) Peter? *(pause)* Huh. Maybe he *has* gone to a party. *(clipped exhale)* Anyway.

(inhale) Smirke was *clearly* wrong about the Powers balancing each other, at least. I mean – i-i,it's *obviously* impossible. There's too much variation in, in how much something is feared by people any one time, an-and if that's the case, I suppose it's… not impossible that Peter… *might* be telling the truth.

I don't know what he's talking about when he mentions Millbank. The old prison I guess? Tim said the tunnels under the Institute were all that was left of it, but – John said he'd checked them pretty thoroughly.

(sigh) I'm not the one who knows all about this stuff. I wish – *(he breaks off)* N,no. No, it's fine; I'm *fine; (huff)* I can do this.

(slight pause, inhale) I don't know what Peter's planning; my, my guess is that it might involve something below the Institute. Hopefully by the time you get these tapes I'll have something more concrete for you.

Good luck, John; I –

Stay safe.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG139 – Chosen

Statement #0063011

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Eugene Vanderstock, regarding the creation of Agnes Montague, her life, care, and death. Original statement given November 30th, 2006. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist. Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Arthur asked me to tell you that Agnes Montague is dead. He asked me specifically, because he knew I'd have to write my whole *bloody* story down for you and it would hurt, like *hell.* But I talked out of turn to him, suggested that we should just burn this whole place to the ground with you inside, so I suppose this counts as my punishment.

He thinks I'm scared enough not to make good on my threats without his say-so. And he's probably right. Just as well you're not here. Smart move on your part. They always are, aren't they? Smart moves. Someday you're going to push your luck too far, and when

you do… well you just better hope it isn't Jude who comes to collect.

So, me? I was born in '36 – I know, I don't look seventy, but burning the candle at all ends does have a few advantages. Until you burn out entirely, at least. It's hard to say how much I've got left in me, how much longer my sacrifice can buy me. But when I go, you better believe I'm going big, and it is going to *hurt*.

You know, I got my start in the Blitz. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was *[Glenn]* Dunlop's house that did it, you know. We were always playing together outside; sometimes his mum would give us tea. Well, it was gone. Nothing but rubble and – *(heh)* and Desolation. Glenn and his parents had been in the shelter out back, but I guess it wasn't quite sheltered enough, and only his dad made it out. He was a tall, strong man, used to work as a stevedore, and I'd never seen him without a stern expression and a pipe. But now, staggering through the ruins of his life, the look I saw on his face – It woke something in me. Something truly awful.

Anyone who talks about "the Blitz spirit" wasn't there, or wants to paper over their fear with nostalgia. Terrible things happened in the Blackout, and we hurt each other just as much as the Germans hurt us. And I hurt so very many people.

A building fire is a dreadful thing, but so much more dreadful when it's shining out into that night.

It was the first of my crimes, but not the last, and arson has always

been my thing. It's such a simple way to destroy everything someone has built, both literally and figuratively. I found my god through my own path, served it in my own way, and when Arthur and Diego found me, told me there were others that shared my devotion- well, I can't say it doesn't feel nice to belong. Even if we do have our… little disagreements.

And one of those disagreements came down to… I suppose you could call it destiny. We all felt the calling, the dreams, pulling us ever closer to a world of fire and loss, a place of burning and agony when we remade the world in the image of the Lightless Flame, for one Diego called Asag.

We all felt it, *longed* for it. But a longing is not the same thing as an instruction. We'd all been touched and warped by proximity to the holy burning fire, but none of us had any special knowledge, no matter what Diego claims he might have read. *He* wanted a grand inferno, a ritual of apocalyptic burning that would make the firebombing of Dresden look like a sparkler.

Which sounded… amazing. But a few of us pointed out that the Allied air force had a tad more firepower than we did, as none of us were likely to make the rank of Air Marshal anytime soon.

And that's when Arthur proposed his own plan: A chosen one. We would create a messiah, the flame incarnate, one who could usher in this new world, and lead us in what Diego called "The Scoured Earth."

When we finally decided, it was Eileen Montague who came forward as a volunteer. She was five months pregnant at the time, and had already taken care of the father in the usual manner of our little congregation. Some objected, said that unless the child was conceived of the flame, it could never be a true incarnation. But they had no idea of how such a conception could possibly even work, so it was decided that it would have to be enough to birth the child by fire.

We burned down five acres of woodland to create the site. At the center of the blackened, ash-covered forest we built a pyre so high and strong the flame would be clear for miles, and so cunningly built it would catch in moments. Before it, the great bowl of pure water for Asag's scalding baptism. And in the center of pyre, a hollow, where Eileen was to lay.

We prayed, and sacrificed, and anointed her body with holy oil and a crown of kindling. I protested the last one, felt we could do better than to ape the Christians, but I was shouted down.

At last, the hour was at hand, and as the first contractions started, Arthur struck a match. The fire was so immediate, so intense, that I was almost brought to my knees, the light of the pyre so bright for a second before it turned inwards, robbed of its glow and comfort, and turned entirely into blistering and unbearable heat.

It covered Eileen in a second, flesh blackening and cracking, lips parting in a scream that was all at once agony and joy and terror and communion, as layer after layer of skin and muscle and bone

were one by one destroyed by the force of the flames, until at last nothing remained of her but ash and bone.

And on top of that, sleeping peacefully among the fire, a baby. Untouched, unharmed, and to our eyes, alight with a burning divinity.

We baptized her with the boiling water of Asag and named her Agnes, as had been her mother's final request. But, raising a messiah, as it turns out, is a lot more challenging than creating one. The sacrifices we fed Agnes worked fine, and maintaining her as a vessel of the Lightless Flame proved no real problem at all. But dealing with her as a child was far tougher.

She was quiet, considerate, but prone to fits of violent rage, which, while not unexpected given what burned inside her, still made living in a single location for any length of time untenable. She could not be allowed near other children for fear of discovery, could not be left *alone* for any significant length of time, and any who were not directly blessed were often unable to survive even an hour in her company. We even lost a few members whose blessings proved… insufficient.

Arthur tried to frame all this as a test of faith, and declared that those who we lost raising Agnes had been found wanting in their devotion to the Lightless Flame.

Prick.

She was just a brat.

Eventually she began to settle down, to reach equilibrium and take her lessons more to heart. She became studious, quiet, seemed to accept and acknowledge her destiny, her duties as our chosen one, and at times she even spoke dreamily of the Scoured Earth and the pain of the world to come. Her strength was growing by the day, and even some of our most devout could not touch her for more than a few seconds.

There was some division among us as to the best course of action, something that will surely not surprise you at this stage. Some thought she needed to walk among normal children, interact with those who saw her as one of them. Some thought she needed to continue training her focus. And some thought we had waited long enough to strike at our enemies, and she was powerful enough already.

The compromise we came to was Hill Top Road. We knew it was a stronghold of the Web, full of other children Agnes' age. We would supervise from a distance, but were confident she would be in no danger. The Mother of Puppets has always suffered at our hand; all the manipulation and subtle venom in the world means nothing against a pure and unrestrained force of destruction and ruin.

We were right on that front, though if we had known exactly how powerful the Web was in that place, perhaps we would have reconsidered.

I was… not one of those assigned to watch our chosen one, so I can't say much about exactly what happened within the walls of

that house, but it seems the fight scarred the place in a way far deeper than simple fire. A scar in reality, that I believe has since been compounded by the interferences of other powers.

Regardless, the effect it had on Agnes was unanticipated. As far as we could tell, she had destroyed the place utterly. And yet she remained bound to it, *tied* to it in some vital way. I knew when Arthur told me she had kept Raymond Fielding's hand, that he was worried. But none of us could know what *you* were going to do.

Truth be told, I don't know what you actually *did* do; neither Arthur nor Diego would explain it to me in detail, and Jude simply flies into a rage when it's brought up. I assume it's why we were waiting, biding our time for decades, unable to bring our designs to any culmination. Jude had only just joined at the time, and was – *besotted* with Agnes, though I couldn't tell you if she loved her as a god, or as a woman. Or as both.

Whatever the situation, whatever you did, we were left paralyzed. Unable to go any further with our destiny, and, I was assured, unable to remove the impediment.

So we waited. Agnes had reached adulthood but would age no further, so there was no worry to that. Her fire would someday die, of course, but until then it would neither fade nor dim.

We did what we could. We found her a place to live, gave her Jude for a guardian, and provided for her material needs. And the years began to… slowly burn away.

My job was to provide for her less mundane requirements. I was to secure her sacrifices. I would spare you the details, but I do not wish to. I worked in a factory, you see, large furnaces that glow red-hot at all hours of the day and night. Eventually, enough of my superiors had suffered accidents or injuries that I had obtained a management position.

It was difficult to take the space I needed, and make the necessary adjustments, especially without anyone noticing, but eventually I was able to create a small workshop, just beneath the main furnace. It was far too hot for anyone to check, so I had my peace.

I took foreign workers, mostly, those with the fewest connections to complicate matters, and the most hopeful dreams of what their life might be. They were the ones that provided Agnes the most satisfying nourishment.

I would wait for them to be alone, and then I would catch them unawares. Melting their mouth shut was a simple matter, and the screams they were able to make with their throat alone were easily drowned out by the constantly roaring machinery.

I would drag them down to my workshop and slowly, bit by bit, I would melt them, draining the now liquid fat from their bodies, that I could later render into tallow. Their heart, their eyes, and their tongue I would scorch down to ash and mix into it for texture, while the rest I simply incinerated.

Once fully rendered, I would turn these poor souls into foul-

smelling candles, the wicks twisted from whatever hair and tendons survived, didn't ignite with any flame, instead burning with a black ember. And if you listened very closely, you could almost hear screaming.

Agnes would take them to her small, empty flat, lay them on the floor, and light them. Over the many hours these candles burned, she would crane over them, so Arthur tells me, inhaling all the agony, suffering, and loss from which they were created. Or he could have been lying to me, just keeping me busy with torture and murder so I didn't get in the way of anything.

I don't think I would have minded that, actually. At least I felt useful.

Aside from that, Agnes simply waited. We all did, but I think it was the hardest on her. So much fire and destruction trapped raging inside her as she simply sat, placid, waiting for… something.

Of course, none of us suspected what was actually going to sink it all. I mean, if you'd told me, I'd have laughed at you. That *stupid* coffeeshop twit. I honestly don't know why Arthur allowed it, or why Jude didn't step in; she's usually so jealous. But Agnes – *(exhale)* Maybe Agnes asked them to leave him alone. Or maybe they were just surprised by her interest in this – boring, unremarkable fool. Maybe they assumed it was some long, torturous plan, and she was simply building the kindling for a bonfire of aching loss and suffering such as we had never before seen. *(sigh)* And I suppose, in a way, she was.

Just not the one any of us expected.

It wasn't love; I'm sure of that. I don't think it was even happiness. I think it was doubt. In that tiny sliver of affection lay a whole universe of doubt. The sort of doubt that the torturing flame incarnate cannot have, but that too many years spent in silent patience, followed by one clumsy flirt in a coffeeshop, could create. A tiny hairline fracture which destroys everything.

When she told us – *(inhale)* I have known anguish and destruction like few in this world, but the memory of that night still makes me shudder. The sadness and the grief that we felt at what we knew we had lost.

It was Agnes herself that suggested it. If we tried the ritual and failed, she said, it might be hundreds of years before we had the strength to try again. But if she ceased, not in culmination of fire, but in a cold and quiet death, perhaps her spark would return to the Lightless Flame and she could try again.

Not immediately, likely not even within my remaining lifetime, but sooner than if she burned. And so we hanged her, as she requested. All because of that most insidious of emotions: Hope.

We have allowed Jude free rein on what happens to the coffeeshop boy, though Agnes asked her not to interfere. She has not yet harmed him, but I cannot imagine what is going through her mind. The misery and pain he has brought upon himself.

For all her anger, she is not rash. And I fear her quiet consideration

far more than I worry about her temper. It may be he lives the remainder of his natural life, but she will make sure he is never happy, and never without pain.

As for you, *(shaky inhale)* whatever you did, and whatever protection it might have afforded you is **severed** with Agnes's death. Arthur has told us not to harm you yet, but this whole thing has really rather weakened his authority, and many of us are now looking towards Diego for leadership. But we shall see, I suppose.

I hope, when it is time, we may burn you forever, Gertrude.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends. *(inhale)* Nice to see Gertrude also used to get a lot of threats. So far, it doesn't seem that any of them went desperately well, except for Elias, of course, but he didn't threaten, did he, just – did it.

I'm curious to see what it was she did to derail this big ritual, because I'm sure she didn't pay poor Jack Barnabas to fall in love with Agnes. *(beat)* Well, ninety percent sure.

No one's come seeking vengeance recently, though, and looking at the details for the *[Butcher's]* steel plant in Scunthorpe, it does seem like Eugene is still around, so I can only assume some sort of equilibrium was found. Given what happened when I met Jude Perry, I'm not in any rush to track him, or any of them, down myself.

Diego I assume to be Diego Molina, who Basira crossed paths with back in her Sectioned days, and Arthur – could be Arthur Nolan, though going from the head of a cult to watching over Jane Prentiss as a landlord does seem like something of a demotion. God knows. It's not like I don't have my own office politics to keep track of.

[He sighs.]

The others are doing… better, I think. Basira's busy doing research for something secretive, *unsurprisingly*, but she seems to be adjusting, to, uh… the new Daisy.

I actually like Daisy now, which is a… really weird feeling. Melanie's quiet, but I think therapy's helping. Haven't seen Helen much. The door is – sometimes there, sometimes not. I haven't knocked. I'm never going to trust it. Trust – her.

(brief pause) Trust **it.** And I shouldn't. Whatever its relationship to the person who was or is Helen, assuming that I can ever know its motivations is a mistake. And that just leaves Martin, which… *(long pause, inhale)*

Why were we chosen? Agnes was created, crafted with a specific purpose so finely tuned that even a grain of uncertainty threatened the entirety of her being. *(bitter laugh over next words)* But I'm so full of doubt, it feels like there's no room for anything else, and – *(big inhale)* – I'm sure Martin is the same.

Is there destiny here? Bloodlines, and – prophecies? O-Or did we

just – stumble into this. Maybe… we're the opposite of Agnes. Maybe our doubts are *exactly* what we need. I-If that's the case, I'm a – an *amazing* chosen one. *(steadying breath)* Don't know how that would work, though.

I'm just worried about Martin. *(sigh, under his breath)* Christ. *(normal)* Every other Avatar gets to have their feelings burned right out of them, but me? I've just got to sit in mine.

I know he said he had everything under control. *(inhale)* I *need* to trust him. Whatever he's doing with Peter, he's – *(inhale)* He knows what he's doing. Probably. I just – I need him to be okay; I just **do.**

If I – *knew* what his plan was, if I knew what Peter was doing, if I just – *(he stops, cuts himself off)* Can I?

[The low rumble of the Archivist's static begins to sound in the background. The Archivist makes a few sounds of effort, which begin to grow both louder and more ragged.]

[Then the high-pitched static that resembles microphone static layers itself on top with its strange, musical, near-angelic quality, and it becomes clear that the Archivist is putting a lot of effort into this Beholding, and that, as in "Heavy Goods," it is not clear how much of this he is in control of.]

[He continues to struggle through the process, and as he does, the distinct squeaky static of Peter Lukas begins to fade in as well.]

[There's a sound that's difficult to place, could possibly be some things knocked off of the Archivist's desk, but which could also be the sound of a door opening. The Archivist groans.]

[Then all at once, the static all fades out; the Archivist begins to regain his breath.]

ARCHIVIST

(gasping for breath) End recording.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG140 – The Movement of the Heavens

Statement #7150101

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The Archivist takes a deep breath.]

BASIRA

Coffee.

[She sets down a cup of coffee in front of him.]

ARCHIVIST

What?

BASIRA

Coffee. Drink it.

ARCHIVIST

I'm really, uh… Fine.

BASIRA

You look awful. You try drinking with Daisy again?

ARCHIVIST

[overlapping] She was here last night, as *you* know.

BASIRA

Drinking alone, then.

ARCHIVIST

It's not a hangover. Well, not – I wasn't drinking.

BASIRA

Drugs, then? Sick? Got some weird monster disease?

ARCHIVIST

Seriously?

BASIRA

[no-nonsense] We've been over this. You need to tell me stuff. Communication works both ways, you know.

[The Archivist sighs over her last words.]

ARCHIVIST

Y-Yesterday I tried something I – *[slight pause]* I, I deliberately tried to… Know something, like I did in the coffin, but there was too much, *[he sighs]* and, uh –

BASIRA

What did you find out?

ARCHIVIST

[dry laugh] Nothing. There was too much.

BASIRA

You don't remember any of it?

ARCHIVIST

You drink the whole contents of a bar, you don't remember what the Merlot tastes like. *[sigh-adjacent sound]* It just *hurt*.

BASIRA

Sure.

[Some rustling, as she takes out some papers.]

ARCHIVIST

What's that?

BASIRA

Statement. You in a condition for it?

ARCHIVIST

[immediately] Yes. *[long inhale]* Yes, what's this one about?

[More rustling.]

BASIRA

Took me a while to hunt it down again, but – you remember Maxwell Rayner?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, of course; your – warehouse showdown?

BASIRA

Yeah, well, whole thing kinda stayed with me.

ARCHIVIST

Mm, I can imagine.

BASIRA

Well, there's more history there than we thought. Capital-H History.

ARCHIVIST

John Flamsteed? Basira, this is from *way* before the Institute!

BASIRA

The first Astronomer Royale. Had the post until his death in 1720.

ARCHIVIST

1. He died on New Year's Eve.

[second to realize what he's done] Sorry, I didn't – Can't really help it.

[He gives a small laugh.]

BASIRA

Well, either way, he really hated the man who succeeded him. His former assistant, Edmund Halley.

ARCHIVIST

As in… "Halley's Comet," Halley?

BASIRA

Yep. And Flamsteed had a… what's the opposite of a pet name? Like a nickname for someone you hate.

ARCHIVIST

Uhhh… I don't –

BASIRA

[overlapping] Well, he had one of them for Halley. Called him

“Reimer.”

ARCHIVIST

Reimer? And, and you think –

BASIRA

Names shift over the years. ‘Specially if you’re not keen on keeping the same body.

ARCHIVIST

[pure, wondrous shock] Right.

BASIRA

Just – have a read. Let me know when you’re done.

ARCHIVIST

You’re not staying?

BASIRA

Watching you do your thing? No.

[The Archivist makes a sound that sounds rather like he’s mentally kicking himself.]

ARCHIVIST

I – suppose I understand.

[As the door closes behind Basira, he takes a deep breath.]

ARCHIVIST

[still breathy] Right…

[stronger] Statement of John Flamsteed, taken from a partial unsent letter to Abraham Sharp, 1715. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist. Statement begins.

Um – *[flips page]* Uh –

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

But my affliction in writing to you is of a wholly different character. And were I not well sure of your firm alliance and counsel, I should under no extremity impose it upon you. For I have killed a man, and barely do I have the covering of great passion for it, for I was well within my senses at the time.

You are familiar of course with my persecuter and tormentor Edmond Halley. The one so oft descending upon me as Nemesis with her sword to avenge upon my hubris. It was he, who with the president of the Royal Society, Isaac Newton, printed my catalogue of stars without my knowledge, robbing me of the fruits of my labor, turning my triumph to naught but *ashes*.

I have had – many a contest with the president, but I harbor little true bitterness toward him. He is a blockish creature of vanity, concerned with his appearance only, and likely to fly into an

indecent heat and knavish talk at any dispute. He has no reverence for God, and I pity him the fire that awaits. But in life, my thoughts of him are simply those of disdain, and hold no corner for true hatred.

I put no such chain upon my spirit when I make my considerations of Halley, who I have long called Reimer to you in my letters, for as the odious Nicolaus Reimer persecuted the great Tycho, and ran his noble genius to exile, so, too, has my own Reimer pushed me toward ruin.

I have detailed much of his offenses in my letters to you, but as much again I have concealed within my soul and given no voice. Simply know the robbery of my celestial catalog was but the least of it.

I will admit, that in my heart, I nurtured such dreams of revenge that when they came to me the name of God felt hollow upon my lips. Another dignity stripped from me by mine enemy.

Such were the depths of the hatred that I found within myself that whereupon I would spy Reimer at the Royal Society, if I were unobserved in turn, I would to no deliberate end begin to follow him. Oft it was that I would follow his path until my better humours overtook me, or I was seen by my quarry, who would smile, and offer his insufferable greeting.

So it has been this past year, though I have never had fear he might know my intentions.

Yet this month past, it has been… much changed. Reimer's wanderings, hitherto aimless or meandering through the gardens and pathways of the Royal Society, or the coffeeshops of Fleet Street, have of late drawn him almost out of London entirely, to a strange and shrouded wood not a league from what might draw the interests of the pompous fool with whose whims I was now well-acquainted.

And in that quiet seclusion, while I looked on in silence and astonishment, he would meet with figures both man and woman alike, with dull clothing and eyes that in the darkness of that wooded place seemed wholly black and empty. Their words were soft and impenetrable to me from the spot wherein I was concealed, but they had much impact upon Reimer, who would often stagger backwards as though struck.

They led him further through trees of gnarled and twisted woods, where the thick roof of leaves permitted not the light of moon or stars, and there they knelt around a pool so black, if it had been India ink it could have scarcely been darker. I held back a cry that threatened to force itself from my lips, for I am not so blind as to be ignorant to the practices of vile pagan exultation.

And I can describe what I saw around that pool as nothing less. And dismiss as you will my words as the shaken memory of a man appalled, but at that awful moment, their cries of worship seemed to form shapes that stirred in the water, such as I have never seen in my time upon this earth.

I fled, of course, and considered the courses such as I might pursue to relieve myself of this dreadful burden of knowledge. No longer was my concern purely for revenge upon Reimer, but a quite acute terror of the savage rites the practice of which were clearly among my peers.

I had not seen with clarity those compatriots alongside whom Reimer had joined in awful raptures, and could not state with confidence that any among the faculty to whom I might make report of his debauchery would not in turn make it known that I was telling such things of Halley, an astronomer of note, whose conduct to all others has been unimpeachable.

No. If there was to be a confrontation or action taken against *Reimer*, it would be I, and I alone that would have to take it.

I know it was the second of May when this took place, for it was no doubt the crowning glory that he had stolen from me that occupied his mind that eve, and caused his steps to quicken and grow careless.

Again he traced his path under that dark and hidden wood, and again I followed, quiet in my manner, keen in my observance. I cast around for other figures, but in that moment, Reimer was alone. He proceeded then, as before, to the pool of blackest water, and the clear skies of night were lost amongst the leaves. All was quiet as he gazed into that smoothed and liquid darkness.

This, I knew, was to be my chance.

I stepped from my place of concealment and began to decry him, casting my censure upon Reimer and naming before him the vile acts of pagan villainy which I had myself observed. His mute shock was but for a moment, before he let out a noise the likes of which I can scarce describe, and charged towards me, his fingers curled to claws that sought my face and eyes.

I wasted no time, and drew my small sword, and praised to God, who gifted me foresight to carry it. I struck Reimer a fierce blow to the leg. He fell, still clutching at me, and in a moment, cast my sword away into the trees and grabbed at my coat. With a fierce strength never before awakened within me, I gripped the head of my foul adversary, and forced it down, into the dark pool before us.

There I held it, the water so cold upon my skin the marks have yet to fade. And Reimer thrashed, and kicked, and made such sounds as I have never before heard of the dying.

And he was still.

I drew him up with the black water still thickly flowing from him. He was dead at my hand, and though I well knew it to be an act of defense and retribution, I felt within me a sudden terror of discovery.

I took my sword and returned to hiding in the dense growth of the forest, fearing that, should I return upon the path, my passing might be met and marked. Better to wait until I had the surety of unseen passage.

And as I waited there, the enormity of my actions settled upon me like lead, and Reimer's dark-eyed compatriots arrived to attend him.

Seeing him prostrate and lifeless upon the ground was clearly a shock, and their distress was marked upon them. And yet there seemed no sadness or horror within their passion, but surprise and confusion, and the question they cast between them was that of what was to be done, for it seemed Reimer was vital to a task as yet unfinished.

His body was borne up by them and taken away, at the time, I believed, for burial. And when I was certain I was once again alone, I fled, leaving those infernal waters for good and all.

And were that the end of my poor story, you may well imagine my confession of such to you, for laying it in writing is an unburdening beyond what I could have foreseen. And yet it was not this that inspired in me the need to write you an account.

It was what occurred but two days past, for I was in my observatory making my notes of adjustments, as my position requires, when I was called upon, not unusually, by the president of the Royal Society. I was astonished at how cordial his conduct seemed, his temper even and his heat steady.

But it was not the attitude of the president that robbed my tongue of speech.

It was that in his visit, he was accompanied by Edmund Halley. My

dear Reimer, whose body had gone cold and still in my own cruel hands.

He had – little to say, it seemed, as the president went over, once again, some – detail of my equipment, and Reimer, who was and **is** dead, simply watched me in solemn silence. Were it not for his handing books to the president, I should have thought him a shade or haunt, but his substance was far more than such could ever achieve.

At length, Mr. Newton took his leave, and Reimer went to follow. Before his departure, an exit that could not come too soon for my nerves, he turned towards me, and grasped me firmly by the shoulders. In my shock and fear, I offered no fight, and returned his gaze as he began to thank me.

His gratitude was so plain and sincere that I could scarce understand it as he spoke, but he repeated it again and again, thanking me for his life. For his freedom.

I stared into his eyes, and though they met mine, I saw spreading inside them the darkness and mist. Whether he be blind now, I know not, but those were not the eyes of Edmond Halley, though they were the eyes of my Reimer, the one I couldn't destroy.

It is with this at the forefront of my thoughts that I write to you, Abraham. I know you have some small acquaintance with him, and I must warn you Halley is no longer Halley. He may appear as such, and – ape those previous observations of his own, and those more

skilled, but it is **not** him.

Look into his eyes, and you will know. You will – know.

ARCHIVIST

[heavy inhale, hint of surprise] Statement ends. *[long exhale]* Right.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE, SOME TIME LATER]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

BASIRA

So?

ARCHIVIST

So Edmund Halley was Rayner. Or, at least – whatever was inside him. You said it was dead, though.

BASIRA

I thought it was. We shot him to hell before he could, uh… pour himself into that kid.

ARCHIVIST

Hm.

BASIRA

But I mean – didn't you say he got blown up in World War I as well?

ARCHIVIST

Ah, uh, possibly the – the details are, um – *[exhale]* it's not exactly clear.

BASIRA

You don't- Know?

ARCHIVIST

No, and I'm not about to push my luck and try to force it. Besides, I, I rarely get anything when the Dark is involved? It's a bit of a blind spot.

BASIRA

Hm. Point is, we can't be sure.

ARCHIVIST

Agreed.

BASIRA

You don't know what the ritual for the Dark is, right?

ARCHIVIST

Not really, no; um, based on *this* and everythi – uh, something to do with the Sun, I would guess? I, um – an eclipse, maybe.

BASIRA

I don't think so. There's not one due for a while, and I've been wondering for ages – why Ny-Ålesund? I mean, sure, that far North, it gets dark for a long time, but – there's also really long days in the summer.

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

BASIRA

But I think – Have you got a pen?

ARCHIVIST

Uhh – Yeah, i-in the drawer.

[Basira opens the drawer.]

BASIRA

Ah, John. What's this?

[She picks something up.]

ARCHIVIST

Hm? Oh. That's… I, th, uh – that's my rib.

BASIRA

[lost] Right.

[She puts it back.]

ARCHIVIST

Yep.

BASIRA

And… the jar of ashes.

ARCHIVIST

[stressed] Not – not, m,mine – I mean, it belongs to me, I, I, I guess, but it's not – stationery is in the, uh, other drawer.

[Sounds as the stationery is retrieved.]

BASIRA

Right, thanks.

ARCHIVIST

Mm.

[The drawer is closed.]

BASIRA

Okay.

[Rustle of paper.]

BASIRA

Now… Look here.

ARCHIVIST

R-Right, ye-yes, I, I know where it is.

BASIRA

I don’t think Ny-Ålesund is the ritual location.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

BASIRA

I think it’s a, a staging ground.

ARCHIVIST

For what?

BASIRA

The darkest place on the surface of the Earth. The North Pole, during the winter solstice.

ARCHIVIST

I hope you're not suggesting that *Santa* works for the People's Church.

BASIRA

[exasperated] John. It's eleven weeks of pitch-black night, as far from the Sun as you can get on the planet.

ARCHIVIST

Alright. So, why haven't they done it already?

BASIRA

I think they were waiting for Rayner to get his new body. But my source is telling me now that they're gearing up for something.

ARCHIVIST

These… sources, are they same ones that sent you to the Australian Outback while I was… burying myself alive?

[Basira sighs over his words.]

BASIRA

Their info is normally good.

ARCHIVIST

[yeah, right] Hmm.

BASIRA

There is one more thing that might convince you.

ARCHIVIST

They have an eldritch ball of some sort of manifested dark matter that's going to be the focus of the ritual.

BASIRA

I thought you said you couldn't Know things about them.

ARCHIVIST

I can still *read*. Actually, you should – probably see that stateme – you know what, no, later. *[heavy inhale]* So what's the plan?

BASIRA

I'm getting us passage on a boat heading up there.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

BASIRA

I bring all the guns from Daisy's old stash, you bring the spooks you used to mess up that delivery guy.

[Long pause.]

ARCHIVIST

What – That's it? Christ, I thought *my* plans were half-assed.

BASIRA

It's all about when we go.

ARCHIVIST

I don't follow.

BASIRA

Summer solstice is the 21st of June. So, we leave in a fortnight.

[The Archivist begins to take a heavy breath as she speaks.]

BASIRA

And should arrive about a week before. No danger of sunset or darkness for a long time. Stands to reason that they'll be at their weakest.

ARCHIVIST

I don't know. Is Daisy coming?

BASIRA

[short pause] No.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. I, I just thought –

BASIRA

We've talked about it. If the Hunt takes her again, we don't know if she's coming back. And neither of us want that.

ARCHIVIST

No, o-o-o-of course. And I, I don't imagine Melanie would be keen to come.

BASIRA

She wasn't.

ARCHIVIST

Why am I always the last to know about these things?

BASIRA

By this point, I just assume the Eyeball tells you.

ARCHIVIST

That would imply it tells me anything *useful*. Now I'm stuck knowing how your year eight PE teacher died.

BASIRA

Miss Peterson?

ARCHIVIST

Pancreatic cancer. If you're interested.

BASIRA

I – wasn't?

ARCHIVIST

[struggles for a moment] No – no, o-of course not.

[He clears his throat.]

ARCHIVIST

Alright, so just – me and you, then. *[sigh]* I don't suppose you could get some of the team that helped you take Rayner down last time.

BASIRA

Oh yeah, sure. I'll just drop them a message.

[The Archivist sighs.]

BASIRA

You know, we've actually got a group chat going called "British Cops who love to do extrajudicial spook killings on foreign soil."

[More sighing.]

BASIRA

I'll just see if they're free Saturday –

ARCHIVIST

[overlapping] Yes, yes, alright! Alright. *[sigh]* You're sure about this?

BASIRA

No. But if I'm right, this is the best chance we're going to get. *And* I can't do it alone.

ARCHIVIST

Okay, then. *[inhale of bolstered confidence]* Let's do it.

[Exhale.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG141 – Doomed Voyage

Statement #0181106

[CLICK]

[ECHOES OF A SHIP'S HOLD]

[OCEAN GOING SOUNDS ARE CLEARLY AUDIBLE THROUGHOUT]

ARCHIVIST

Any better?

BASIRA

[Nauseously] Not really.

ARCHIVIST

You were the one that suggested we go by boat.

BASIRA

Didn't think I, urgh… *[sniffs]* I haven't really done proper boats before.

ARCHIVIST

Hmm. Hold on.

[FOOTSTEPS RING ON METAL]

Excuse me?

SHIPHAND

Yeah?

ARCHIVIST

Do you know when we're scheduled to arrive?

SHIPHAND

Captain reckons two days.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

[FOOTSTEPS RING ON METAL]

ARCHIVIST

He says another two days.

BASIRA

Yeah, I heard. Thanks.

What?

ARCHIVIST

The tape recorder.

[SUDDEN INHALATION FROM BASIRA]

BASIRA

Get ready. Any idea what's coming?

ARCHIVIST

N-No… No, I-I don't think that's it.

BASIRA

It's not recording for nothing.

ARCHIVIST

No, I… I think…

[Calling out] Excuse me?

SHIPHAND

Yeah?

[FOOTSTEPS APPROACH]

ARCHIVIST

[Interestedly] You…

SHIPHAND

Uh…

BASIRA

John?

ARCHIVIST

You used to work for Salesa.

SHIPHAND

What? You— -Who did?

I don’t know what you’re talking about.

ARCHIVIST

Mikaele Salesa. You used to work on his ship.

SHIPHAND

I don’t know you.

ARCHIVIST

[Archly] But I know you.

BASIRA

John…

ARCHIVIST

Floyd Matharu. Served on the *Dorian* from 2011 to 2014. With Salesa.

BASIRA

John, I'm not sure about this.

ARCHIVIST

I am.

Tell me what happened.

FLOYD

Wh-What is this?

ARCHIVIST

Whenever you're ready.

FLOYD (STATEMENT)

A-Alright. Sure.

He… H-He w-was a good boss, you know? I worked for him for three years, and… treated us well. He never lied to us about the sort of thing he was into. He didn't exactly volunteer specifics, but we all knew what we were doing wasn't legal, and we trusted him because he knew what he was doing.

It was a weird ship to be on, though, and not just because everyone was always gossiping about whatever the latest haunted cargo was.

A lot of it was because we had a-a captain, a man named Gaultier, but he reported to Salesa. Normally, if the captain's working for someone they're going to be on the ship all the time; they'll just be organising things, so there's no worries about who's in charge, you just obey the captain. But Salesa always travelled with us, keeping an eye on whatever he was moving that day. It felt like… it felt like he was a part of the crew, even though he didn't actually have a job to do. Always felt a bit uncomfortable when the captain was giving orders and he was there. I could sometimes feel Captain Gaultier looking to him for support or confirmation, and that always slightly undermined our confidence in him. It wasn't a problem, not really, and Salesa never threw his weight around, never contradicted the captain in front of us or anything. It was a weird dynamic.

Way the others talked about it, he'd been at this for a long time, decades at least, and when I sailed with him it was clear he knew exactly what he was doing. He was the only one ever allowed in the cargo bay during a voyage.

I only saw one person try to break that rule, Jésus, a nasty piece of work we picked up in Colombia, and who clearly thought he smelled an opening. Salesa was a big guy, you know, but he never really made anything of it. He always used to say he needed a crew to follow him out of trust, not fear. But he didn't have a problem using his size against Jésus when he found him. He threw the little rat overboard without a second's hesitation, and there was nobody on that ship unhappy he did it. They'd all seen what could happen when someone else got in the cargo bay.

My last voyage with him was the one that killed him. Seven years ago; I still have nightmares sometimes. Tried to escape it, but some things follow you no matter where you go. A smarter person might have stayed off the water, but this job, it's all I've ever really known. So here we are.

It was an odd time, I remember. I don't know exactly what was different but the whole mood of the ship was off. Kind of sour, somehow. I think it must have been Salesa. Everything always kind of… reflected him. You know people like that? When he was happy, satisfied, everything seemed to run smooth. When he was angry, everyone would be on edge, irritable. But right then? He was tired. Everyone could tell. The man had been doing this job non-stop as long as any of us could remember, and he was clearly starting to feel it. Once found him poring over an old photo album. The ship was there in the pictures, but a different captain, different crew. I asked him who they were, and he just looked at me, eyes sunken like hadn't slept, and for a second I felt like he was seeing someone else, not me. But then he just shrugged. "Dead now," he said, "doesn't really matter."

That was about a month before Gantulga died. It should have been a nice simple job. I helped load the box under Salesa's supervision, and it was barely a few metres across. Dantez told me it was a carpet that he'd bought from an old Burmese beggar woman who fed lost children to a crocodile head, but I never paid any attention. He liked to make up wild stories about whatever it was that Salesa had bought. It was light enough, though, so I thought he might

have been right about it being a rug. I don't know what went wrong. He was always so careful. I didn't even usually think about the cargo during the trip itself, but this time I didn't have much choice.

Gantulga and I were both off-duty that night. Played some cards, I lost some money, and we both headed to our bunks. Nothing unusual, nothing worth being burned into my mind. Except that three hours later, I was woken up by the sound of Gantulga screaming his lungs out. I ran over to him, trying to see what was going on. And he was being attacked, that much was clear, but there wasn't anyone there. The *thing* that was grabbing him, trying to reach down his throat and pull him apart… it was a pattern. Diamonds and swirls and colours that seemed to imprint itself upon his skin even as it pushed itself messily into his nose and mouth. What it was made of, I couldn't say; the way it moved and shifted made my head throb with pain. I screamed, staggered back and fell, hitting my head on the table. I can't have been out for more than a few seconds, but when I opened my eyes he was there, dragging the thrashing body of Gantulga through the door and up onto the deck. I followed slowly, unsteadily, but got there just in time to see Salesa throw both him and what looked like a blank rug over the side and into the ocean. Then he collapsed against the railing, a look of intense exhaustion passing over his face, and I left him there.

He was drunk for the next two days, and we kept sailing on towards Cape Town. We no longer had anything to deliver there, but no-one was really sure what else to do. Whenever there'd been similar

disasters before, Salesa was quick to make a new plan, let know Captain Gaultier know what the next steps were. It was one of the reasons the crew trusted him so much. He just always seemed to know what we needed to do next.

This time, though… felt different. He was distant, quiet. His words, when he spoke to you at all, were blurred with alcohol and regret. Nobody knew what the plan was, so we just kept going.

When we hit port, he disappeared for a while, nobody was sure where, and even when he showed back up he was spending his time on the phone. We all assumed he was trying to arrange the next job, but he had this… wild energy I'd never seen in him before, and it scared me. Whatever he was planning, it wasn't going to be like the others. We were sure about that.

Finally, he calls us all together. The captain's there, but he doesn't look happy. Salesa starts talking, says he's been doing this too long, he's getting slow. Says he's retiring. So far, so sad, but not unexpected at that point. Then he says he wants to send us off with a proper payday, that there's one last job he wants us to do. Very dangerous, very illegal. There are murmurs, questions, some angry, some confused. Salesa says anyone who doesn't want to be a part of it, they can stay in port with a decent severance and find another job. A few take him up on that, and the rest of us decide to stay, though the captain's clearly not happy this is costing him experienced crew. Still, he doesn't speak up. I can see in his eyes the greed's got him, like it's got the rest of us. It's not like we were underpaid on the *Dorian,* but there were rumours about how much

money Salesa was making out of all this. When someone like that says there's going to be a big payout, you listen.

He was really cagey on the details, clearly being careful about exactly who he was telling exactly what. All I knew about what we going on were as follows: we were on our way to the Maldives, to a tiny island about a hundred kilometers south of Malé. No-one would tell me the name of the island, but in that area of the world any islands that small are usually private, though I had no idea who the owner might have been. Once there, Salesa and the four crewmembers he trusted most were going to take the small boat over to the island. We were to wait, and prepare to depart as quickly as possible as soon as they returned. He didn't say exactly what he was expecting to happen on the island, but it wasn't hard to guess that whatever he was retrieving, it wasn't something he was purchasing legally. He made it clear we shouldn't stop if we were followed or challenged by the authorities, and we should all be prepared to defend the ship should anyone attempt to board or stop us.

The three hours I stood on the deck after they left on the little boat may well have been the longest of my life. It was night, of course, and we had no lights showing, nothing that would give us away. The island was completely dark as well, and if it hadn't been for the bright moon shining down on the dense trees and sandy beach, I might not have been able to see it at all. The sound of the boat's engine died quickly, and I was left standing there, surrounded by silence, waiting for something to happen, full of fear over what it

was I had agreed to be part of. I longed to have a drink, to close my eyes, and rest for only a second, but every nerve in my body was on alert.

When they returned, only two of the four crewmembers Salesa had taken were still with him. Questions as to what happened were met with dark looks and shaken heads. I felt the rumble of the ship beneath me almost immediately, and only got the briefest of glances at exactly what it was we were all risking our lives for.

I've gone over that memory so many times, trying to think what I might have missed, but even now, whenever I think of it, it just looked like an old camera with a broken lens. And then Salesa closed and locked the metal box, and carried it down into the hold as we started to sail away.

As he did so, I saw a flash out of the corner of my eye. I was on watch, so I hurried to the stern to see what was happening. There was a storm over the island. I don't know where it came from, it can't have been more than a minute since I'd last looked at it, an- and the skies were completely clear. But now it was covered in lightning, the rolling clouds above it dark and angry. The forked flashes came quickly, less than a second between them, and as the thunder started to hit my ears, I could see the trees of the island beginning to catch fire and burn. But there was something else. In the light of the flashing storm I could clearly see the waters around the island, and there was something there. A huge shape, a shadow surrounding it on all sides; getting darker, getting closer, coming up from deep, deep below the surface. It must have been huge, so large

that the edge of it almost touched the ship, and had we been a few minutes slower I have no doubt whatever awful thing emerged that night, it would have taken us as well. Something began to break the surface as I realised the deep rumble was no longer the thunder, and I closed my eyes and fell to the deck, gripping the rail with all my might as a wave hit us from behind, propelling us away from it.

When it had finally subsided, and I could bring myself to look back, the island was gone and ocean was still.

Our journey back was a long one, but Salesa was in a far better mood than I had ever seen him. His step was light, his smile was easy, and the deep circles under his eyes seemed to be gone. He didn't talk about what had happened on the island, nor of Christoph or Adreas, the two who had not returned. When we finally arrived at Southampton, he insisted on throwing a ridiculous party to celebrate our good fortune. The drinks flowed freely, and he walked around and shook each of us by the hand, telling us how much he would miss us in retirement and hiding his insincerity well. I do not believe there was a sober person on the *Dorian* when the night was over, and we slept easily. Well, the others slept easily, but they had not seen what I had seen.

I didn't hear the explosion myself. Dantez told me about it, as it had apparently woken him and a few others of the crew. A big explosion, they said, further into the port. We staggered onto the deck and, sure enough, smoke could be seen a little way off, its source hidden behind a wall of shipping containers. There was no reason at that point to suspect it had anything to do with us, but I

think somehow we all knew what it meant. That something had gone terribly wrong. Nobody could find Salesa or the captain.

We were still stood there, arguing amongst ourselves about what to do, when Captain Gaultier made his dramatic reappearance. His clothes were torn and his hair matted with blood. Before any of us could speak he commanded us to leave, to take up anchor and get out there. We did as we were ordered, and left immediately. Some tried to ask the captain about Salesa, but he just shook his head. He wasn't making much sense. We managed to gather the two of them had left early to deliver the artefact, but something had gone wrong. There had been an argument. They had been betrayed. Salesa was dead.

The captain died soon after; the shrapnel trapped in his skull finally getting the better of him. Who they had been meeting, how exactly they had been betrayed, were secrets he took with him to the grave. The crew fragmented after that. I think a few of them managed to retain ownership of the *Dorian,* but they weren't people I was close to. So I jumped ship the next chance I got. And I have tried ever since then to leave those memories behind me.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

FLOYD

[Dazed] What… what…?

ARCHIVIST

[Soothingly] You can go.

FLOYD

Erm… I, I don't…

ARCHIVIST

Thank you Floyd. You've been… very helpful.

FLOYD

C—

ARCHIVIST

It's alright, Floyd. You just… need a break.

FLOYD

Yeah… Sure.

[RINGING FOOTSTEPS DEPART]

BASIRA

What the **hell** was that?

ARCHIVIST

He had information about Salesa. I thought it would help.

BASIRA

Is that why you were so keen on *this* ship?

ARCHIVIST

I wasn't sure. Just had a hunch there was something here.

BASIRA

And what, you thought the best way to find it was by… slurping it out of his brain?

ARCHIVIST

He didn't exactly seem inclined to volunteer the information. Besides, you said I needed to be ready for Ny-Alesund. "Full power" I believe were your words. The statement helped.

BASIRA

And now he's going to see you in his dreams as he relives that for the rest of his life. Because… because a tape recorder told you to do it?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, Basira, he is. And I am sorry about that. But we needed it.

Anyway you're the one who wants to be like Gertrude. You think she'd give a damn about a few bad dreams?

BASIRA

No.

ARCHIVIST

No. She got the job done, and didn't care about the cost.

BASIRA

But I thought you did.

ARCHIVIST

…

I had to know, Basira.

BASIRA

It wasn't right.

ARCHIVIST

You could have stopped me.

…

But you wanted to know as well, didn't you?.

…

Get some rest. Two days yet.

[CLICK]

MAG142 – Scrutiny

Statement #0181206

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, SOMEWHERE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[There's a clock ticking steadily in the background throughout.]

MARTIN

Uh,uh, right, so…? W,What happened?

[The voice of the person to whom he's addressing this question is feminine, in the mid-tones. They clearly are a bit… apprehensive in coming to the Institute.]

STATEMENT GIVER

I don't know, a – Look, I-I just need to, to talk to a manager, or something?

MARTIN

Okay, uh, well, uh, yeah, actually; I'm a – I'm a manager. Go on.

STATEMENT GIVER

Okay, well… *(sigh)* I'd like to – to talk to you about one of your staff.

MARTIN

(slowly) Go on…

STATEMENT GIVER

There's, uh, there's been… I'm being harassed.

MARTIN

O-kay, um. Just, uh, just let me grab a form. Uh… one second.

[He flips through some pages over the following:]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Oh, okay, okay, um… What – Would you mind telling me what happened? Uh, what they did?

STATEMENT GIVER

He.

[Martin sighs.]

MARTIN

Did he look like he hadn't slept in about a week?

[Before he even finishes his sentence, the about-to-be statement giver *mhms*.]

STATEMENT GIVER

Yep, uh,

MARTIN

(overlapping) Right.

STATEMENT GIVER

He's been… Yeah, I think he's been, eh… following me? Kind of.

MARTIN

Yeah, I see. Well – he's not here at the moment, so, I mean – *(inhale)* why don't you tell me what happened?

STATEMENT GIVER

Look, *(sigh)* I dunno… I-It's just kind of *weird.*

MARTIN

Well… *(small laugh)* Y'know, uh, weird is what we do.

[The statement giver laughs as well. It's awkward, and more than a little out of nerves.]

STATEMENT GIVER

Okay…

MARTIN

Just – Just tell me what happened. Please. Um. I – I won't judge.

STATEMENT GIVER

Alright. Uh – So, you – *(she sighs)* You've, uh – You've got to understand my job, okay? Uh, I work for Thames Water? Uh – mainly pipes and stuff – like, I – I mean, I'm a qualified engineer, but you know, most places it's just manual stuff, like digging, and replacing pipe – Sometimes I've got to – You know, there are actual sewers involved. *(faster)* It's not really *[unintelligible]* myself enough, you know? Yeah, but who does. We don't all get to build Formula 1 engines. Anyway. Look, it's fine. I actually get paid quite a bit more than the rest of the crew, because, you know, if there's, if there's something that goes *wrong*, or needs an engineer, here I am!

Sorry. Um. The point is that I, I work underground. *Did* some work underground. *(explosive sigh)* Look, I know – I know this doesn't have anything to do with – just – *(shaky inhale)* About five years ago, we were doin' some work under Kentish Town. It was pretty nasty. Do you know what a fatberg is? No – uh – it – Don't worry; *Don't* look it up – Seriously, *don't.* You know? It was just – It was a bad job. They had to spend a whole while down there l -, and now I don't know if – there was something with us, and, and the work we were doing – Or maybe just the brickwork wasn't right anymore;

maybe it was rotten, or, or unstable, or – or the place – well, the place kinda collapsed on me.

You know? It's just – one moment I'm stood there, torch in hand, and the next I've got a shooting pain all up my arm, and I can feel god knows how much rubble on top of me, and it's absolutely pitch dark, I mean –

Yeah. *(short, manic laugh)* I don't need to tell you it, look – I've – I've never been so scared; it was like – the world went away. Must have been a full five seconds I thought I was dead.

Excuse me.

MARTIN

It's alright. Just – take your time.

STATEMENT GIVER

Yeah. *(shaky breath)* Yeah.

Well… I don't know how long I was down there. Well – Well, I do. It was… three hours. They told me. After. But it felt like… God, it felt like it could have been weeks. I never had a, a great sense of time, and just… gone. Everything. Every bit of light or sound or anything, that changed, that said time was passing. There was nothing.

Before that, I,I never really thought about time, you know? But now… yeah. But I was lying there, panicking, screaming, just trying

to make any noise, any movement, that didn't hurt like *hell.* And I – Okay. I felt something. No, I felt some*one* grab my ankle.

At first it was great; I had this, this huge wave of relief, right? Someone had found me; they were getting me *out.*

It wasn't. It was cold, right? Like – like old stone? Or, or wet sand. It felt like – rough and, and, like the fingers weren't – I don't know, they felt like they weren't in the right places? And then I started thinking, and – I realized something – the way, it was, it was grabbing me, holding my leg, there was – *(big inhale, shudder)* It *had* to have been coming upwards. From *below* me. And there was no one else down there when that tunnel collapsed. Absolutely no one. I'm sure.

So then… I start screaming again. And kicking, thrashing about. It hurts, but – I mean, I'm scared out of my mind, but th-the hand, it just grips, tighter, and I can feel its f,fingernails, just – I,It – It started *pulling.* Just pulling down, dragging me down into the earth, and – yeah, it – The – I, I don't know, just – this close to *breaking*, just absolutely *shattering*, and – and then a slab of stone came away in front of me, and there was daylight, and Abby – one, one of the work crew, was staring at me, and, and yeah.

Just like that, it was – gone.

But the bruise stuck around. Horrid, muddy bruises where the fingers had grabbed me.

So. It-It took a long time to get over that. I mean – That's not weird,

right? I mean, it was a bad time, you know – it stays with you. I signed off, what, probably about six months, with the injuries? I had really bad, uh, nightmares. Claustrophobia, I mean, obviously, right? But, uh, but I did my physio, you know, talked wi – with the counselor they gave me. Look, I did everything I was supposed to, and, and yeah, I – I guess I was fine. You know, once the bruises were gone – well, I mean, it's easy to blame memory, right? *(she laughs, nervously)* You know, hallucination, all the – classic shite you tell yourself. Look, life went back to normal, I – I was fine. Until – about two weeks ago.

MARTIN

And that was when you met J – Wh – uh, one of our employees.

STATEMENT GIVER

That's when he showed up. Uh – You know the coffeeshop, uh, just next to *[Pinnacle]*? Uh, th-the nice one. Well, I actually had – had a date there, you know, cute guy I met online, too sporty, which, *[joke]* I like, look, it – it doesn't matter; Anyway – I get a latte, and, and sit down, waiting for, uh – Grant? I want to say Grant. Or- Ga-Gareth? Gary? Anyways, look, he's running late, and, and I'm just reading, and there is this… *creep* in the corner- your guy. He just… keeps staring at me, like- oh, *properly* staring, like it is *super* intense. And, and real… weird?

Like he knows me, but I sure as hell do *not* know him. I – *I* try to ignore him, look, I just – I just read my book. And everytime I look

up – there he is. Watchin' me. You know, I'm about to say something, you know, like wh – *(she splutters)* When in comes Gary – Gareth – Gavin – and suddenly, hey! It's a date. And I really didn't want his first impression of me to be, you know, me yelling at some creeper in the corner, so I just… swapped chairs, so that I've got my back to your… *colleague,* and get on with it.

It didn't really matter, you know, in the end; Gareth was, uh, was a bust, you know; not like – you know. I mean. He – he was fine, I guess, but it's just nothing really there between us, you know – just a nice boring coffee with a kind old man. Took about an hour, and he clearly wasn't feeling it either, so we, you know, we just called it. I mean, I think we actually shook hands, when he left, which, I mean, tells you something, right?

So, look, I'm packing up, all done, and, and I just – I just sort of turn, you know? Just to check if he's still there – and he is standing *right* behind me. Like, like a few *inches* from my face? Look, it's *messed* up! And I start to ask him, you know, *what the hell,* man, you know, like -? But he just starts talking. Slowly. But real intense. He says he works here, at the – the Magnus Institution, and I say what even is that, and he says *he wants my story.*

He says he *needs* to hear what happened to me, and I – I want to tell him to, to go away; I, I wanted to, to *kick* him and run. But – I – *(sigh)* I sit down. And I start to tell him – everything. About the job, about the collapse, a-about the hand – And more than I told you, even, and as I do, it – it's like I'm there again. Like I can *feel it* grab my ankle, I, a,a cold, dead hand, and I just can't stop talking, like I

cannot shut up.

MARTIN

A-a. Are you alright?

STATEMENT GIVER

No! No, I'm not! Of course I'm not – It felt like – Like I was throwing up all those feelings again, and I wanted to, to scream, but instead I just *sat* and calmly told him my life story, and he just *watched* me. His eyes, like – His eyes were li-like *drinking in* every fragment of *my* misery. I *can't* – It – *(pause)* And then it was over. And he looked – He looked at me like he'd just eaten, like, a *perfectly* cooked steak. You know what he said, he said *"Thank you."* Thank you, just like that, like – like reliving the worst parts of my whole life were just a bit of a favor that I'd done him.

And then he left, and, and I-I just sat there, and cried for a while. *(sniff)* That wasn't the end.

MARTIN

He – You've seen him since?

STATEMENT GIVER

(shaky) No. Not – But kinda. I *feel* like I do. I've been – *dreaming* of that tunnel again. Nightmares. Oh, god – awful nightmares. Nightmares, where the, where the hand keeps pulling, and I go deeper and deeper and, and deeper into – *(shaky inhale)* It takes me

places I do *not* want to go. And he's there the whole time, just… *watching* me. Watching me *scream* and *thrash* and – *(inhales again)* He's *all eyes.* He's **all eyes.** *(inhale, less shaky)* Look. I know that's not – *(half-hearted laugh)* That is *my* brain. I'm not blaming him for, for being in my dreams. You know, I guess I can't.

[She sniffs again.]

That's absurd, right? It's no – But I feel like I'm seeing him when I'm awake, as well? I've been- I've been having a lot of problems, since he talked to me – well, since *I* talked to him. *(she swallows)* Since I told my story. Th-The claustrophobia? It's back, you know, worse than it ever was, and I can't do my job. I have these, these *screaming* panic attacks every time I try, and – and what am I supposed to do? It feels like every time I'm even slightly underground, I –

Can't even go into a shop basement anymore without feeling that – hand. Every time I do, every time I get that – panic just rising up my throat, I see him.

[Something drips in the background.]

STATEMENT GIVER (CONT'D)

He's there. Not when I look properly. But just at the edge. The corner of my eye. And he's got – well, maybe, maybe it's just me; maybe I just – I met him once, in a coffeeshop, and he was a creep,

and it messed me up. But that's enough. Right? That is **enough.** So, *(exhale)* So I want to put in a complaint, like, like a *proper* complaint. Look, I don't want to go to the police. I mean, I doubt they would – They wouldn't even, you know, let me get this far, now would they, but – *(sniff)* Sorry. So, thanks, I guess.

MARTIN

Okay, um. Alright, well – *(he clicks a pen, sighs)*

Firstly, I'm re– I'm really sorry that this happened. Um, in – in terms of next steps –

STATEMENT GIVER

(overlapping) Just – I just – I don't know- Y-You know, *talk* to him, I guess? Just tell him, like, like I mean that – it's *not okay.* You know, right – I'm not – I don't *know* what he did, but you know, he can't just go around and well, you know, just keep doing –

MARTIN

(cutting her off, gently) Right. I – I understand.

STATEMENT GIVER

Good! (short pause) Well – Y– I just, I don't want to see him again. *Ever.*

[Some rustling and footsteps.]

MARTIN

Wait, h-hold on, no, I just need to –

STATEMENT GIVER

(overlapping) No! That's it – That's – my – complaint! You know? I, I – I can't. This place – I – I can't be here. I have to –

[They open the door.]

STATEMENT GIVER

Bye!

MARTIN

Uh – No – Uh, but you didn't give me your –

[The door slams. They're gone.]

[Silence.]

MARTIN

…name.

[He sighs heavily, messes with the form.]

MARTIN

What the hell do I do with that? I mean, *christ*, John, that's – that's not okay! Oh, that ca – that can't – *(he cuts himself off)* I mean, it's not him, is it. Not – not really. It's – what, addiction, instinct, maybe m-mind control, something like that? I – can't believe he'd *choose* to do something like that. No, no, I – I can't think like that, though, I, I *can't* let myself, because if, if he's already gone, then all of this is just – *(cuts off again, heavy, weary sigh)*

Th-The worst part of it is I don't even want to talk to him about it. I just – I suppose I'm just getting comfortable with the distance. Cut off. *(short, humorless laugh) Lonely. (inhale)* Mind you, Peter's not wrong. It really is easier than actually just trying to communicate with people. I should probably try and get him this tape, let him know what happened, that someone came in to – *(sigh)*

But then, would that just come across as an accusation? Because I don't want to – and then, then I guess he'd hear this bit as well, so – I – it – I –

What do I do?

[The clock ticks on. For a few moments there is silence, and then there is a soft knock at the door.]

[Martin inhales.]

MARTIN

Go away.

[The knocking continues, a little more insistent. Martin sighs.]

MARTIN

(to whoever's outside) Come in!

[The door opens and Daisy enters.]

DAISY

(soft) Hey.

MARTIN

(confused) Hi?

DAISY

Do you mind?

MARTIN

Can – Can I help you…?

DAISY

I – I saw someone come out, so I – I thought that, you know.

MARTIN

Do – Do you *want* something?

DAISY

Ju-Just ignore me. Continue with – whatever.

[Short pause.]

MARTIN

…Are you alright?

DAISY

Yeah. Just, uh, a bit empty around here, you know?

MARTIN

Not really.

DAISY

Melanie's out, and – *(sigh)* John and Basira are still off. Bit worried. But they can take care of themselves, you know?

MARTIN

(tight) Again, not really. *(short laugh)* No one really talks to me anymore.

DAISY

'Cause they reckon you're working for the bad guy?

MARTIN

Pretty much. Don't you?

DAISY

Oh, I mean, you're *definitely* working for something evil, but – so are we.

MARTIN

(inhale) Yeah. Seems there's plenty to go around, these days. *(pause)* It doesn't bother you?

DAISY

Didn't use to.

MARTIN

And now?

DAISY

Bothers me less than trying to go alone. At least – now it's on my terms, better than being blackmailed into it.

MARTIN

(another humorless laugh) Yeah, I *guess. (brief pause)* They told you about Elias, right?

DAISY

Yeah. Basira said. Don't like him being alive. Trying not to think about it too much. Don't want to get too angry, start to – hear the blood.

MARTIN

…Sure.

DAISY

Can't hear his lies from prison, though, so – that's something.

MARTIN

I thought you believed him. You were doing all of his dirty work.

DAISY

Well, wasn't willing to call his bluff. Not the same thing as *believing.* Just too big of a risk.

MARTIN

Not for Melanie.

DAISY

Well, maybe she was the only one with any sense. Even if he was telling the truth, *(sigh)* If we all… *died*… there are worse things.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

How was it?

DAISY

Don’t wanna talk about it.

MARTIN

I listened to your old statement. Wasn’t your partner down there?

DAISY

Yeah. Didn’t find him.

MARTIN

You don’t want to go get him?

DAISY

(heh) I’m not going back.

MARTIN

(vaguely smug) Hm, I’d have thought you’d have at least *tried,* or –

DAISY

(overlapping) I **said.** I don’t want to talk about it.

MARTIN

I know. Not nice being interrogated, is it?

DAISY

(inhale) I – Oh.

MARTIN

Yeah.

[Pause.]

DAISY

I'm sorry, Martin.

MARTIN

It's alright. Wasn't you. *(he inhales)* Not really.

DAISY

No, it was. I hate a lot of what I did back then; doesn't mean I'm not responsible for it, doesn't mean it wasn't me.

MARTIN

(exhales) Anyway. So what's this field trip they're on?

DAISY

They, uh… they didn't tell you?

MARTIN

(ha) No, I – What. Daisy, where have they gone?

DAISY

You know that town in Norway?

MARTIN

What? I – Wai – *What?* You don't mean Ny-_Ålesund_?!

DAISY

Yyyyeah. They reckon there's a ritual they need to, you know –

[Martin sighs in the background as she speaks.]

MARTIN

Yeah, but – Peter didn't even tell me –

[He starts opening and shuffling through drawers.]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

I don't believe this!

DAISY

Sorry. Shouldn't have said anything.

MARTIN

No, no, it's – thank you; I just – For god's sake, can he not stay safe for like, like *ten minutes?*

DAISY

I don't think that's an option for him anymore.

MARTIN

Yeah, I mean, sure – *(slams a drawer shut)* – But he just – He just doesn't *think*. He always just *immediately* charges straight off into danger with whatever – whatever half-assed plan occurs to him at the time; I don't *get* it!

DAISY

What's to get?

MARTIN

What?

DAISY

I-I mean, it's pretty standard stuff.

MARTIN

What?

DAISY

(coughs lightly) You used to see it all the time, back in the force, especially with the Sectioned. Not like there's *normal* trauma, you know? But it's pretty common. The most important thing becomes control, engaging on your own terms. Even when it's *stupid* or dangerous. Anything to not feel helpless.

MARTIN

Oh, god.

DAISY

And of course, for John, there's survivor's guilt in there, too. He thinks he's not human. Makes him very… self-destructive.

MARTIN

Yeah, well. We've all had trauma.

DAISY

And everyone's changed.

MARTIN

Yeah. *(long inhale, exhales as he speaks)* I suppose. You're – You're pretty observant, you know.

DAISY

Detective, remember?

MARTIN

Yeah, you did mention. Would have thought Basira would've had more sense, though.

DAISY

When Basira and I were partners, I'd see this happen sometimes. She can read a situation like no one I know, always seems to know

the right move, but for all her research, she never wants to put a plan together. I think she just hates all the… unknowns, the… variables. *(sigh)* Contingencies. If she spots an advantage, she'll grab it, and trust herself to figure out the details as she goes.

MARTIN

(heh) Hm.

DAISY

It's worked so far.

MARTIN

I mean. *(soft exhale)* I *guess.* Still sounds really dangerous.

DAISY

Ye-ah… Wanted to go with them, protect them, but… *(soft shaky breath)* Life's always more complicated than that, isn't it?

MARTIN

Not really.

DAISY

(inhale) You recording, or?…

MARTIN

Hm? Uh – Oh – No, no there was – hang on –

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG143 – Heart of Darkness

Statement #0181606

[INT. PEOPLE'S CHURCH RESEARCH FACILITY, NY-ÅLESUND, NORWAY]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[In the background, there is a steady racket of – what exactly, it is unclear, but something. It sounds rather like a dryer with a pair of shoes inside.]

BASIRA

Sure it's this one?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[A clicking noise – flashlight?]

ARCHIVIST

Tape recorder thinks so, too.

BASIRA

Right. Something's coming, then?

ARCHIVIST

Could be.

BASIRA

No windows. Guess that makes sense. We still alone?

ARCHIVIST

I never said we were. Just said I couldn't see anybody.

BASIRA

(noise of understanding) Oh, I thought you meant, like, *See* see.

ARCHIVIST

Oh – No.

BASIRA

We need to figure out proper terms for this. *(background noises intensify)* What are you doing?

ARCHIVIST

Closing the door.

BASIRA

Leave it open. We need as much light as possible, and I'm not seeing any bulbs.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[The click of the flashlight again. The background noise is gone by this point, and we hear their footsteps as they begin to walk.]

BASIRA

Eyes peeled.

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

Was that a joke?

BASIRA

Yeah.

[Silence.]

BASIRA

Any clue where everyone is?

ARCHIVIST

Your guess is as good as mine.

BASIRA

Well, my guess is an ambush.

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

I don't know. Everyone back at the research base seemed pretty sure this place was empty.

BASIRA

And you believe them?

ARCHIVIST

They weren't lying.

BASIRA

Wait – You – Did your –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Oh, yeah, no, I don't think they noticed.

BASIRA

So they were serious. It's been empty for, what, a year?

ARCHIVIST

Bit more. As far as they *knew,* anyway.

BASIRA

So, what, this was another waste of time? Like that Church near *[unintelligible – Dasan?] (under her breath)* I'm gonna *kill* that son of a bitch –

ARCHIVIST

No, I – *(inhale)* I think it's here. I – I, I can feel it, like a – hole in my mind.

BASIRA

They just left it here.

ARCHIVIST

I – *maybe. (shaky half-laugh)* Kinda wish Daisy was here.

[Silence, but for the footsteps. Then they, too, stop.]

ARCHIVIST

Basira?

BASIRA

Yeah?

[Footsteps resume.]

ARCHIVIST

Sorry. *(shaky inhale)* I know this isn't – BEHIND YOU!

BASIRA

Down!

[Basira fires her gun, and hits some*one,* who grunts in pain. At the same time, we hear the sound of glass shattering – likely the bulb inside Basira and the Archivist's flashlight.]

BASIRA

Don't move!

[The person continues to grunt in pain. Basira and the Archivist move closer.]

[The unknown figure spits at them.]

ARCHIVIST

Oh. *Charming.*

[The person starts breathing faster.]

BASIRA

Who are you?

[The person just grunts angrily.]

BASIRA

John?

ARCHIVIST

Who are you?

[The now-familiar bass component of the Archivist's static kicks in. The person has a brief moment of resistance before their name slips out:]

MANUELA

(resisting) Manuela. Manuela Dominguez.

[In the background, we hear the mid-tone range of the Archivist's static fade out.]

BASIRA

Where is everybody?

MANUELA

(scoffs) Go to hell!

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) ***Answer her.***

[Big, booming static again.]

MANUELA

They're **dead.** Because of *you.*

ARCHIVIST

Me?

BASIRA

(to John) What did you do?

ARCHIVIST

(hey!) Nothing, I don't think!

MANUELA

Your Institute.

ARCHIVIST

(soft) What?

MANUELA

So she sent you to finish the job?

BASIRA

Who?

MANUELA

Your *Archivist* –

ARCHIVIST

I –

MANUELA

– Gertrude Robinson.

ARCHIVIST

Gertrude?! I –

BASIRA

(overlapping) That doesn't make any sense.

ARCHIVIST

I, uh… *(inhale) What. Happened?*

[Bass.]

MANUELA

Don’t – Don’t make me, please!

ARCHIVIST

Tell me.

[Manuela exhales. The static intensifies. We start to get the mid-tones again, and nearly get all the way to the point where the highest shimmery overtone usually kicks in.]

MANUELA

Fine!… Fine.

[The static immediately begins to fade.]

MANUELA

And what do you wish to hear? Shall I tell you of the decades of preparation? Of the long wait for the eclipse? Three hundred years from the failure that birthed the thing that preached from the depths of Maxwell Rayner. The sacrifices made to birth the Dark Star that would make it all possible?

It was to be a week of night and horror, culminating in the eclipse that passed over Ny-Ålesund on the 20th of March, 2015, almost three hundred years after Halley’s eclipse passed over London. We had hundreds of sacrifices prepared and ready, plunged into darkness and terror for days on end. All prepared to culminate in the unveiling of that point of purest night at the moment of the

eclipse's height.

It would open the door to a world of true and holy darkness, extinguish the sun, and take us to a place where we would be redeemed of our base and corrupt need for light and warmth.

Maxwell was here, with me, prepared for our moment of triumph, and our churches around the world were ready, in those lost and forgotten places of worship, shut up and left in shadow.

Hither Green was, I believe, where *your* Institute was watching, but Natalie's efforts were but a small and meager part of the greater effort. When they collapsed, it was as nothing to the grand ritual. Though… perhaps we should have seen it as the first sign of what was happening. But, we had no idea.

To begin our seven day feast, we slew the still and lightless beast, and drank of its stagnant blood, submerging the first of the sacrifices in the brackish water it had blessed with its stillness.

Maxwell plunged its claws into his chest, freeing the darkness within him, and we waited. And we sang. And we exalted in divine stillness.

The darkness was beyond anything that could be imagined, and even in my *wildest* experiments in the void of space, I could not have believed such a peace was possible, as I felt in the quiet whimpering terror of that place.

The sky was light, but we were well-protected, and we knew that

when the sun was swallowed in eclipse, the darkness would be complete. We believed it far too late for anyone to stop us, and the crude methods of your *Archivist* least of all. The death of a few have never been more than an inconvenience, and that's all she was ever really capable of.

You were not the first to try and stop us, you know. Not even within living memory. I was but newly joined when Lynette fled the church, and Maxwell had her silenced. But I remember her brute of a husband. He fed the beast for us, you know, when first he believed Lynette might still be saved. Then, later, we faithful served as his fuel to banish it.

But, not for long. That's the thing about darkness, isn't it? You try your hardest to eradicate, flood your surroundings with light, but it's always there at the edges, waiting for the glow to weaken, to return and cover you forever. Robert Montauk discovered that the hard way. And someday, so will your Gertrude.

But we got so close. We touched it. There is another world, a world of still and quiet darkness, where no heat touches, and death cannot find you. You might wander beneath that empty sky of void forever, and never see a light to guide your way. No left, no right. No up or down. Only forward, into the crowded, shivering gloom.

For that night is not empty, far from it. Things move there, the sound of shuffling. Scuttling. Crawling. A scream. The fall of gentle stagnant raindrops that chills you as you try desperately to know if that is the sound of the storm… or something out there.

It is a world of the fear of darkness, and as I began to see it, I felt again that celestial terror that had not gripped my heart since first I gazed upon the pitch-black sun that *I* had created. The scream was mine, and it was joined by uncounted voices in fearful song. I was complete. It was so very close. We were to slice a hole in the world, and this paradise would flow through the wound like ink, smothering the sun, and all its children.

Maxwell had always had the visions, the drive. Whatever was inside him pulled him to this end, to this great undertaking, like a magnet, and I was so very honored to be his right hand. *Natalie* and the others followed, but they did not truly understand. Not *truly*, with their talk of peace and unity and *Mr. Pitch*. A friendly name, to try and hide from a concept they couldn't grasp. Vardaan Darvish had an inkling, I thought, but he crossed a Montauk, which has traditionally gone poorly for us.

But as the hours turned into days, and the final dusk drew closer, it seemed as though all the uncertainty was washed away.

I don't know exactly when it all started to come undone. I think Maxwell first felt the ripples four days before the eclipse was due. It was strange. Like a pause in the hysterical whimpering and fruitless prayers of the sacrifices. And a ripple that was felt through the waters, and the stagnant blood that bound us. A disruption. We would later learn that this was the collapse of the ritual at Hither Green. But it was only the first.

Our congregation in Alaska disappeared the next day, and Russia, as

well. One by one, it seemed our scattered whisperers of night were falling, and holding it together, keeping the lightless world anchored to our star, bringing it closer, was becoming an almost unbearable strain on Maxwell. I helped as I could, but without knowing what was happening, there was little I could do to stabilize it.

I began to drown the sacrifices. Too soon, perhaps. But it worked, to keep it going, and keep it together, until at last, we felt it. The eclipse.

We had been worshipping in the deepest dark, and yet, when it crossed the sun, I felt it rolling over us, like a cooling balm on a summer's day, plunging us into a deep, black void, far more complete than I can ever convey with mere words.

It was divine. And as we unveiled our new and absent sun, the sacrifices who remained screamed and fell in holy agonies, and the world of endless night we had been promised began to pour in, shining out and all around us. It touched and caressed our souls with the soothing fears of night, and I heard Maxwell weeping with joy at what we had done.

And then, it stopped.

It just. Stopped.

All at once, that loving embrace was stripped from us, and it began to retreat, to recede back into the place it had come from. *(getting emotional)* We were *so close! (softer)* We were so close.

I heard Maxwell cry out, scrambling desperately into the dark sun, stopping *just* short of touching it. But it was too late. Whatever it was that **you** and your *Archivist* did, it clearly worked.

We left, half of us dead, and the other half destroyed by coming so close to the true essence, *(sigh)* and being denied.

In my most wretched hours, I wonder – perhaps it was us. Perhaps we simply lacked faith. We weren't worthy. The world wasn't worthy. But – no. We were ready. We had earned our dark rapture. And we were *robbed*.

I don't know how long we waited after that. It was weeks before anyone spoke. And then… when they did… the arguments began. The recriminations, the desperate resolutions to try again, to find what went wrong. But, I could see in his eyes that Maxwell was so very tired. And all the words fell to nothing. Instead, we began the search for his successor, a new host for his… continuation.

He would regain his strength, and we would plan our next move. It was difficult, though; the approaching culmination meant Maxwell had not prepared another host, and the search for another vessel was long and involved. Finally, about eighteen months ago, we found one: a child, whose father had, by coincidence, been directly marked by the Dark.

It was a desperate plan, but we were desperate, a shadow of what we had been. Maxwell left me here to guard the Black Sun, and everyone else left to help in his rebirth.

But it didn't work, did it? I can only assume we were too weak to hide from *you*, and you struck when Maxwell was vulnerable.

For the first six months, I let myself hope that my suspicions were unfounded, that the silence I felt was simply… him lying low, recovering, before returning to his abandoned disciple.

But no. Soon enough, I could no longer fool myself. He had been slain, and I was alone.

And here I have remained. Perhaps I have told myself that I am preparing, gathering my own strength, and making plans to continue the church in his name. But I think in my heart, I have been waiting for this moment. For the final axe to fall, and finish the last remnant of our holy crusade.

And here, at last, you are.

[She sighs, breathy.]

MANUELA

There. Now you can kill me like the others.

[A sigh.]

BASIRA

She telling the truth?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. I, I mean – Unless she can lie to me somehow. *(inhale) You* said it wasn't the eclipse.

BASIRA

It's not the time.

ARCHIVIST

Well. She believes it, at least. This doesn't make any sense.

MANUELA

Well, where is she? Afraid to face what she's done?

BASIRA

Just **shut up**.

MANUELA

(audible smirk) Coward. So, how did she do it? It's been three years waiting, guarding this place without hope. At least do me the courtesy of telling me *how* she collapsed our moment of triumph.

[A sigh as she speaks.]

ARCHIVIST

You really don't know, do you?

MANUELA

Know what?

ARCHIVIST

Gertrude's dead. She died right around the time of your ritual.

MANUELA

(smirk again) Ha. So, stopping us took everything she had.

BASIRA

You wish. She was murdered. Unrelated, as far as we can tell.

MANUELA

That's – Well – Then why are you here? Maxwell is dead. The ritual failed. What's left?

ARCHIVIST

(inhales) A good question. *(exhale)* Basira?

BASIRA

You said the Dark Sun was still here.

MANUELA

(light laugh) Fine. If you're so keen to take everything, undo the work of centuries, it's just through that door.

BASIRA

John?

[The Archivist sighs. Static begins.]

ARCHIVIST

How dangerous is it?

MANUELA

Only myself, Maxwell, and Natalie could even look upon it. It will annihilate you both in an instant.

BASIRA

Ask her how we can destroy it.

ARCHIVIST

I know how. I just need to see it.

BASIRA

See as in…?

ARCHIVIST

As in… actually see it.

MANUELA

Go ahead. Just try.

BASIRA

(overlapping) Look, it's okay, John. No one else knows it's here. And if we just leave it, no one will know.

ARCHIVIST

No, I – *(inhale)* I'm doing it. *(another steadying inhale)* Get out.

[Basira leaves. The Archivist takes several steadying breaths, and then opens the door.]

[The Dark Sun sounds melodic, like pipes groaning harmonics into the wind, like the mournful notes of a creaking iron gate as it is opened for the first time in years.]

[An enormous rush of static begins building; it is not the Archivist's static, is much too reedy and wispy for that.]

ARCHIVIST

It's – It's *beautiful.*

[The static overtakes the audio field; Manuela gasps and screams –]

MANUELA

No – NO!

[All at once the static rushes away.]

BASIRA

John!

[Basira opens the door and hurries back.]

ARCHIVIST

No, I, I'm okay.

[Something else shatters – there goes flashlight #2. The Archivist yelps. Basira shoots.]

BASIRA

Get down!

[She shoots twice more.]

ARCHIVIST

(breathing hard) Basira?

BASIRA

I'm alright, just – just one second.

ARCHIVIST

(background) Um…

BASIRA

Stay here.

ARCHIVIST

(after her) Look, I'm okay, I can help –

[But it's too late. Basira has walked off, presumably in pursuit of Manuela. The Archivist groans in frustration. There is a relative silence, during which he catches his breath.]

[Then a soft static begins to fuzz in the background. It is one we know, one we have heard many times before. A door creaks open.]

ARCHIVIST

Did you catch her?

HELEN

Yes.

[The Archivist gasps: this is *not* who he had been expecting.]

HELEN

She needed a door.

ARCHIVIST

H-H-How did you –

HELEN

Oh, finding this place was *easy* without the darkness.

ARCHIVIST

Will… she be coming back?

HELEN

(thoughtful) No. Uh… This one, I think I'll keep.

ARCHIVIST

Why are you here?

HELEN

I told you! I've decided to *help*. I thought you might like a way home?

ARCHIVIST

Another door?

HELEN

If you want it. *(short pause)* How was it?

ARCHIVIST

Hm?

HELEN

Looking upon the Dark.

ARCHIVIST

I thought I was going to die.

HELEN

You seem to think that a lot. I remember when you thought you were going to die at my threshold.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

HELEN

Go find your Basira. Then let’s get you both home.

[The Archivist exhales softly.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG144 – Decrypted

Statement #0090310

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, SOMEWHERE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

MARTIN

Martin Blackwood, *(sigh)* Assistant to Peter Lukas, Head of the Magnus Institute, recording statement number 0090310, statement of, uh, Gary Boylan, given October 3rd, 2009. Statement begins.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

It was grey. I remember that so clearly. And hot. But no sun, no sun at all. The sky had that thick layer of clouds that – that catches the heat, and it choked me on it. Fields and fields of yellow grass that went on forever, with rusted pylons looming over all of it. It was that – that *appalling* sort of summer you only get in the middle of England, with all the joy of the season stripped away, leaving endless fields of dry soil and emptiness.

There was nothing to be done, nowhere to go, just watch and wait, and think about the – decay of it all. Walking among the detrites of the countryside is the surest way I know to find yourself close to the *transience* of humanity, seeing the – little hints, the preview of

what's to come for all of us, when the world no longer cares enough to keep us alive.

Have you ever been driving along a motorway, passing through the middle of some rural nothing place, when you spot, in the distance, on some tiny road you have no idea how to reach, a row of three or four terra-suburban houses, just *sitting* there, no town or village for miles, just a weird unattached little street? That's where I live. It's where I grew up, where I left forever, and… where I returned to after my mother died, and my business collapsed.

The two events were unrelated, but – both happened close enough together that I ended up moving back in with my dad. I told myself it was to take care of him, but – *(heavy exhale)* I'd been there five years before I knew it, and in a lot of ways, the old man seemed more capable of dealing with the world than me.

Not that he was supportive. God, no. He'd been a vet for most of his life, and spent a lot of that time working with livestock. I think all those years hanging around farmers must have rubbed off on him. He *hated* doctors, for instance, something I always pointed out was absurd, given his own job. I'd say he was a vet, and he'd say yeah, he was, and start talking about how many animals he'd put down in his career.

I never had any interest in continuing the conversation after that. He'd always been blunt, but after mum died – *god.* It was like his whole personality became callous.

I should have left him to himself, but there was something about that *dismal* little house, all alone except for Mrs Whitshore on one side, and the empty house that no one could sell on the other. Something kept me rooted there, sleeping in a bedroom that hadn't changed since I was fifteen, and caring for a man who I'd rather just *shut up*. *(sigh)* We were both trapped there, I think. Bound together in a sort of wordless misery. I would look at him, and see a grim sort of destiny for myself: trapped here, until I became him; any future I might have had, sacrificed to his. *(long sigh)* I always used to go for long walks through the fields to try and escape for a bit. I usually managed to walk for an hour and a half before my paranoia kicked in, and I started to worry that he'd have a – fall or something, and have to head back.

An hour and a half was plenty, though, for all the places I could go. We were a long way from any real trails, and – *(inhale)* – the most scenic things to see were rusted tractors, piles of discarded tires, or the huge metal skeleton of an old disconnected power pylon.

It was a bleak and empty rural wasteland, and when the summer heat hit, without shade or shelter, it was almost as relentlessly oppressive as that old man. *(shaky inhale)* But I still took my walks.

It was this last August that it happened. I was about an hour into my walk, having had a row with him about his failing eyesight, a subject that made him even *more* defensive than usual; I was passing by an old cheap metal barn when I heard it. I'd been listening to music as I walked, when my iPod abruptly cut out. I stopped where I was, and took it out of my pocket, assuming I'd

knocked it, or somehow turned it off. But the screen was on, apparently playing music, though I didn't recognize the song.

I got a pretty sizeable music collection, but I feel like I do know it pretty well. This one had no artist, no album, just the track name: "Numbers."

As I stared at it, I began to hear something from my headphones. It was a faint and tinny tone, like it was far off, or produced by a low-tech synthesizer or something. The tone began to shift, and I realized that it was playing a tune. It seemed to be a crude rendering of the opening lines of the Skye boat song.

I only got through about a line and a half of the old folk melody before it abruptly cut off. There was a moment of silence, before it was replaced by a voice of a man – but his was so distorted and pitch-shifted that it could have been anyone. It barely even sounded human as it, as it spoke in a strange monotone.

Five. Nine. Three. Seven. Five. Six.

Now, I'm not an idiot. I've heard about number stations; I know all about the Lincolnshire Poacher and the Russian Man; I know they've all got perfectly normal explanations and real-world uses for – espionage and that. What that didn't explain is how a number station found its way onto *my* iPod.

I checked, and its radio wasn't even on. Seemed to be coming from my music player, though I had a look through my library, and couldn't find anything that matched it.

The sky was still grey. The sweat dripped off me as I sat against a rotting fencepost, and the numbers kept coming.

Three. Zero. Five. Eight. Three. Nine. Two. Eight. Four. Six.

Eventually I staggered to my feet and began to make my way home. My footsteps were heavy, and my hands shook slightly as I tried to steady myself. Do you know that one of the symptoms of a heart attack is *literally* a sense of impending doom?

Well, I wasn't having a heart attack, but – I think I know what they mean. What settled over me wasn't *dread*; there wasn't enough uncertainty for that; it was *doom.* I was certain that some sort of disaster was on the horizon.

I'd walked less than a hundred yards when the numbers stopped coming, and "London Calling" started playing again.

That summer seemed to drag on forever. The *boredom* and irritation of trying to care for my dad was only heightened by the weather,and we were both feeling it. Just didn't have anything to *do*.

I don't really want to go into my living situation here, but – it's enough to say I wasn't working a regular job, and while I could, *theoretically*, contact my old mates, they'd all gotten on with their lives without me. The world had moved on. I was left behind.

I did do a bit of research into number stations, but I didn't find anything new. I did find a couple of clips online, though, which

were enough to convince me that what I'd been hearing had been a number station, or at least a – passable imitation, although the voices on the proper recording sounded neutral, almost mechanical – very different to the grating distorted mess I had heard.

I couldn't get it out of my mind, though. What did it mean? What did any of it mean?

Took about a week of searching to find it again. To be honest, at the time I didn't even realize I was looking for it. I just found myself going further and further afield, retracing old routes for the sake of it. Always with my music cranked up so loud, I couldn't hear the insects buzzing everywhere.

I couldn't have told you *why*. Not really. At least not until I heard it again: that same tinny rendition of the "Skye boat song." And then:

Four. Seven. Four. Nine.

I stood there frozen for a moment, that strange feeling of doom returning in an instant. I checked my iPod, and, sure enough, the radio was off, and it said it was playing a track called "Numbers."

It was fainter than it had been before, though, harder to pick out the exact numbers in the distortion and the quiet, so I began to walk again, this time paying close attention to the volume and clarity of the sound.

One. Six.

Fainter to the north.

Two. Eight.

Unchanged. Going south:

Three. Zero.

Southeast was stronger:

One. Six.

But began to weaken again after a mile or so.

Five. Zero.

Much stronger around the eastern hill.

Four. Nine.

There! The pylon. That was it. Except, obviously, that wasn't it. It wasn't a broadcast tower; there was nothing in or around it that could have possibly been sending out any signal. It was just a – collection of old and twisted metal bars, rising up into the half-collapsed power tower. It must have been *decades* since it had been anything other than a decaying steel obelisk.

Even if that hadn't been this case, this wasn't a broadcast; this was – this was – *inside* my iPod. It would have to be something else, something cutting-edge and new – but for miles around me was nothing but droning insects and dismal English summer!

Nonetheless, when I stood in the center of the hollow beneath that pylon's rusted corpse, the numbers came through, crystal clear.

Five. Six. Four. Eight. Four. Six. Four. Seven. Four. Eight. Two. Seven.

With each new number, my blood *pounded*, and my heart raced – th,though I didn't have the faintest idea what they might've meant. I'd actually brought a notebook and pen, I now realize, just to write down the numbers, and so I did.

Four hours I spent, patiently jotting down the numbers. The Skye boat song repeated every hour and half, but I went through the sequence a few times just to assure myself it didn't change, and I hadn't missed any.

When I finally took out my headphones, the sudden rush of summer evening sounds hit me like a wave, leaving me reeling and dizzy. It took me a moment to realize how late it was, and how sunburned I had gotten in the process.

Everything ached, and my heart pounded as I limped home. I'd been out easily twice as long as any time before. But, my dad didn't say a word about it, just sat in front of the TV, laughing at some crappy panel show, smoking that god-awful pipe that left the wallpaper yellow and peeling.

I remember thinking he wasn't content to just destroy himself. He seemed to have to take out everything with him.

I didn't return to the pylon for a long time, except to confirm that the numbers weren't changing between days. I had them, though, and the numbers were all that mattered. I didn't know why; I'm

sure there wasn't a reason, not really, but – I knew it was in there.

Realistically, it would be impossible to decode it without whatever key the cipher might have been using, and honestly, for the longest time, it seemed to be. I did as much reading as I could on cryptography and – codebreaking, and all of it seemed to point me toward one simple conclusion: breaking this code by myself was – simply impossible.

But I still tried. I spent weeks in my room, desperately applying every method I had available. Nothing worked. But I didn't stop. The alternative was looking after my dad, whose recent breathing issues had left him more ratty than ever.

So, I worked myself into exhaustion instead, staring at those meaningless strings of numbers until I almost collapsed, and my eyes couldn't focus on anything. And that was when I realized: it wasn't the numbers. It wasn't the code. It was what was *behind* the numbers, shifting and waiting and, and coming towards me like a tidal wave, and *I knew what the message was*, the urgent and terrible message.

About the destruction that was coming on the heels of mankind, about the cold and cruel warmongers who play games of code and conspiracy, hidden behind the endless streams of numbers.

And within those numbers are all of our dooms. If you know how to read them. And I read them. I read them all, and saw the doom of everyone who lives and breathes and hopes for life and happiness.

I fled the house. I ran to the pylon, that ruined place that knew all of the numbers, and I fell to my knees and wept. I begged it to spare us, to spare me, as I stared at the flesh I knew would redden and bubble and blister away to the bone beneath.

I didn't need headphones to hear the numbers now. They were pouring from the air around me and threaded through my mind, and no matter how I begged, they would not stop.

When I returned, the house was in ruins, the windows shattered and broken, glass strewn across the floor. There was nothing left of my dad, save a charred shadow along the wall, scorched through the plaster, and into the now-exposed brick. All that was left of Mrs Whitshore was powdered bone.

There are *terrible* things coming, things that, if we knew of them, would leave us weak and trembling, with shuddering terror at the knowledge that they are coming for *all of us.* We all made them, and their course is already plotted.

You can see them in the numbers. If you only learn how to read them.

MARTIN

Statement ends.

[He clears his throat, takes a deep breath, lets it out quickly.]

MARTIN

Right. Another – statement. Another side to Peter's Extinction. I think. I – Yeah, I, I couldn't follow some of his reasoning, but I think it was about nuclear weapons? In keeping with the theme, I suppose.

(speaks as if intending his next words to be overheard) I just wish Peter would stop trying to convince me his new power is real, and more time telling me what he plans to **do** about it.

(sigh) And where I fit in. I mean, *fine*, I guess I've li–

[Knock-knock-knock on the door. Martin takes in a small, soft, startled gasp, waits in silence.]

[The knock-knock-knock comes again. Martin flips over the statement, then:]

MARTIN

Come in.

[The door opens.]

DAISY

Mind if I join you?

[Martin starts writing something; the door closes in the background.]

DAISY

They're back. I thought you might wanna know.

[Martin keeps writing.]

DAISY

(inhale) Seems like it went smooth – too smooth for Basira, sounds like. *(small laugh)* Keeps looking at John like she can't believe he made it back.

[Martin keeps writing.]

DAISY

I, uh, I mentioned our conversation to him; he asked me to check on –

MARTIN

Just leave.

DAISY

Sorry?

[Martin inhales as if he's preparing himself for something.]

MARTIN

Get out.

DAISY

(????) Oh. Right. Sorry; I didn't –

MARTIN

It's not difficult; just **get out**!

[He keeps writing.]

DAISY

Fine! Fine. Just thought –

[She opens the door; Martin goes off.]

MARTIN

No! No you didn't! We're not – We're not *friends*, Daisy! None of us are; we're all just trapped together, here, and, and kidding ourselves that we don't hate it. *Christ*, there are more important things than, than *feelings* right now, alright, so just – leave me alone! For good.

[During this, Daisy exhales. Loudly.]

DAISY

Right. You got it.

[She leaves, door closing behind her. The second she's gone, Peter Lukas's trademark squeaky static comes in. There's an added stronger bass to it. Martin sighs.]

MARTIN

Well?

PETER

I'm impressed. And grateful.

MARTIN

(significantly less distressed than he'd sounded just a few moments earlier) I didn't do it for you.

PETER

Even better.

MARTIN

It's easier, this way. I'm sure you would have had no problems sending her away.

PETER

I hadn't really thought about it. And now, thanks to you, I don't need to.

MARTIN

(nearly cutting him off) Yeah, well. It seems to be your go-to move for dealing with anyone.

PETER

I'm just not big on confrontation. You understand, I'm sure.

MARTIN

We. Are not. The *same*.

PETER

Of course.

MARTIN

So what now?

PETER

Did you read it?

[Short pause.]

MARTIN

Yeah.

PETER

And?

[Martin takes a really deep inhale and subsequent exhale: *Give me strength.*]

MARTIN

I believe you.

PETER

You don't still think I'm trying to trick you into a grand ritual?

MARTIN

I mean I'm not about to start chanting stuff for you, but – the details you've given me all seem to check out. *(small sigh)* So far.

PETER

Good!

MARTIN

So what's our next step?

PETER

For you, keep researching. I'm sure we haven't found all the statements in here that deal with the Extinction yet. One of the downsides of not serving the Ceaseless Watcher is that we have to actually look things up. Not to mention that Gertrude was distressingly good at obfuscation. The more you know about our enemy, the better.

MARTIN

And you?

PETER

I have my own explorations I need to attend to. And a, um, meeting. To arrange. For you.

MARTIN

For me?

PETER

I'm absolutely delighted with your progress, and I believe you deserve some straight answers.

MARTIN

…But not from *you*.

PETER

Oh, no. That sort of conversation makes me very uncomfortable; no, I'm owed a favor by a friend of mine. I've asked him to stop by, once he's back in the country.

MARTIN

You're not just going to *tell* me, maybe?

PETER

(can hear the smile) When have I ever?

[Martin sighs the longest sigh he ever did sigh.]

PETER

Oh, come now. What would life be without the occasional twist? Oh, speaking of, I've had report of a workplace dispute in the library, and I would value your input.

I'm trying to get out of the habit of, what did you call it – sending them away?

[Martin sighs again, weary and longsuffering.]

MARTIN

Fine.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG145 – Infectious Doubts

Statement #0090202

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, 2009]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

GERTRUDE

You… don't mind, do you?

[The man who speaks next's voice is low, gravelly. Every word is laced with disdain for Gertrude Robinson, and he seems like he's only just keeping himself from spitting on her. This is Arthur Nolan.]

[He sighs.]

ARTHUR

'Course I do.

[Gertrude scoffs.]

GERTRUDE

That's a shame.

ARTHUR

If I really wanted to kill you, nothing could stop me.

GERTRUDE

If that were a possibility, Arthur, I should hardly have agreed to meet you.

[It's Arthur's turn to scoff.]

ARTHUR

Yeah you would. You'd've set something up. Try to get me first.

GERTRUDE

If I wanted you dead, Arthur, there are much simpler ways to do it.

ARTHUR

Yeah. Think you know how?

GERTRUDE

I do, yes. And I'm very willing to, if necessary.

ARTHUR

(dry) Oh, I'm sure. I'm shaking in my boots.

[Gertrude sighs: Time to spell it out, then.]

GERTRUDE

Look, Arthur, I need you to understand that this isn't simple posturing. I don't see a way we can meaningfully progress this conversation while you're under the impression that your threats mean anything to me.

ARTHUR

Big talk. But Agnes is dead. And I don't know if you heard, but your little woodland circle's been broken. So, I don't really see anything getting in my way, if I wanted to burn the flesh off your snarky bones.

GERTRUDE

Ah. *(small laugh)* I assume you haven't checked on, uh, Eugene, then?

[Pause.]

ARTHUR

What?

GERTRUDE

Eugene. Well, whatever his name was, Vanderbilt, or some such. You sent him to intimidate me a couple of years ago. You must

remember; of course you know him. Used to live in Beckingham, but moved out to that flat in, uh, Ilford last year.

ARTHUR

Yeah.

GERTRUDE

Well, he hasn't been at your little meetings the last two weeks, has he? I suppose no one's looked into it yet; not surprising, he seemed a thoroughly unpleasant little man.

ARTHUR

Are you – Wh– Di–

GERTRUDE

Tell you what; why don't you make a few calls,

[Something, likely a phone, is placed on the desk.]

GERTRUDE

– **check it out**, and then we can continue our little discussion. Alright?

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

GERTRUDE

Well?

[A low sigh, that same sound of the phone being placed on the desk.]

ARTHUR

How'd you do it?

[Gertrude laughs.]

GERTRUDE

You don't need to know that. What you *do* need to know is I can do it again, if I need to. To you, or any of your lackeys, if I need to.

ARTHUR

(hm) Not mine anymore.

GERTRUDE

No, no; I forgot – Your authority isn't what it used to be, these days.

ARTHUR

Yeah.

GERTRUDE

Well, if a warning from *you* isn't going to convince them, let me know. I'd be happy to provide a further example.

ARTHUR

(through gritted teeth) You've made your point.

GERTRUDE

Good.

ARTHUR

Eugene. It – hurt him.

GERTRUDE

(laugh) Oh, yes. I'm sure your master was de*lighted* with how – *awful* his death was.

ARTHUR

Don't push it.

GERTRUDE

You know, thinking about it, the amount of pain and loss and legitimate devastation I've caused among your little cult over the last, what, forty years? I think the Desolation is probably very fond of me.

ARTHUR

That's blasphemy, it is.

GERTRUDE

Is it? Or maybe you just picked a **bad god**.

ARTHUR

Shut it. I don't have to listen to this.

GERTRUDE

Mm, uh, then… feel free to try and leave.

[For a moment, we hear nothing but Arthur's incensed breaths.]

[Gertrude audibly smirks.]

GERTRUDE

Hm. Now, here's the problem for you, Arthur. The way I see it, you came here believing that whatever defenses or assurances I might have had died with Agnes. Or broken, along with the circle. And whether or not you actually *killed* me, you were really hoping to use me to restore your standing with the Lightless Flame.

Murder, kidnap, torture, oh, something to impress the church group. Unluckily for you, I've had almost four decades to prepare

for this, and now… well… you just don't know if killing Eugene was the end of it. *(unmitigated glee)* What, maybe I have something special prepared for you as well.

ARTHUR

(get a load of yourself) You're so goddamn smart.

GERTRUDE

(suddenly cutting) And you're all lazy **fools**. So used to it being easy, to picking off the vulnerable and the unprepared, you can barely conceive of anyone actively working against you, of being **ready**.

You honestly thought when she died I'd just be struck dumb with terror, just waiting around for one of you to *finally* get around to revenge, paralyzed with fear, because that's all you've ever know.

ARTHUR

You've made your point.

GERTRUDE

(hm) I'm pleased to hear it.

[The briefest pause, and then:]

ARTHUR

Do you?

GERTRUDE

Do I… what?

ARTHUR

Have something for me. So I end up like Eugene.

GERTRUDE

Why don't you try to leave and find out?

[Pause as Arthur presumably tries to do this very thing.]

GERTRUDE

Good. Now, we can have a proper conversation.

ARTHUR

You mean – you ask me questions, and I – I spill my guts?

GERTRUDE

No need to be petulant, Arthur. If it would make you feel better, you could ask me a question first.

ARTHUR

Alright. Agnes. How'd you do it? Never did understand it, not really.

GERTRUDE

Ah. That's a fair enough question. It was the Web. I didn't know it at the time, of course, and I would call it an accident, but it never is, with them. It's only after the fact that you can see all the subtle manipulations.

I was very new to it all, of course. I mean, I was, what, can't have been older than twenty-five. Would you believe that you were the first proper ritual attempt I'd encountered. *(she laughs)* I really thought you were unique, special, *(puffed exhale, exaggerated)* an infernal cult raising their demon messiah to bring about hell on earth. *(heh)* You can imagine all the heroic fantasies that that played into.

So, I began researching what I thought was a counter-ritual of sorts. Like I said, I was young, naive. I somehow found just the right books, made just the right connections, and even got what I thought was a piece of blind good luck when I found a tin box in the ashes of Hill Top Road, containing some perfectly preserved cuttings of her hair.

Of course, what I thought was a banishment ritual turned out not to be. The circle I constructed was more of a – *(exhale)* – an invitation.

It let the Mother of Puppets bind me to Agnes, interweave our existences at some… metaphysical level, as it had with Fielding and the house.

It was the most painful experience of my life. I mean, I'm sure it's nothing to you, but I've never had my lungs try to burn me alive

from the inside out before.

I survived, though. And you know the rest. I'm not sure exactly how it manifested on your end. You certainly seemed to get the message.

I kept the circle, over the years, laced it through with signs and symbology of the Desolation to ward off the worst of the side effects, and keep its attentions elsewhere.

[Arthur laughs. It sounds more like a wheeze.]

ARTHUR

Don't envy whoever broke it.

GERTRUDE

Yes. It went very badly for them, indeed.

ARTHUR

So where was it, in the end? I spent years looking for it.

GERTRUDE

(heh) Nowhere special. The middle of a forest in the Scottish highlands. Furthest place I could find from anything and anyone.

[Arthur laughs.]

ARTHUR

Yeah. Fair play. Not like we were ever gonna find *that.*

GERTRUDE

So. *Your* turn.

[Arthur shuffles around, sighs.]

ARTHUR

Go on.

GERTRUDE

What was Agnes like?

ARTHUR

What?

GERTRUDE

Well, for all the Web bound us together, I never actually met her. What was she like?

ARTHUR

I… I don't know. Not really. You got as many answers to that as… folks who met her. Never really knew what she felt 'bout any of it, not really. Not in her own words. Guess that's the thing about being the… chosen one, or – I mean, Agnes was always quiet, but even if you spend all day, every day throwing out commandments and

laying down parables… at the end of it, you're always just the point of someone else's story, everyone clamoring to say what you were, what you meant, and your thoughts on it all don't mean nothing.

GERTRUDE

And were you this introspective when she was alive?

ARTHUR

Well that's the thing about a fall from grace, innit? Makes you look at things from a… new angle. *(pause)* I miss her. *(scoff)* I'll tell you that for nothing. Wish I – I don't know. I'd actually known her, when she was alive. *(long inhale)* Maybe that coffeeshop twit did have a point after all. Couldn't tell you what I saw, at least.

GERTRUDE

Which was?

ARTHUR

(steadying inhale) I saw the sun. So much – power and fire and rage inside of her, enough to burn the world and leave it nothing but desert. But to look at her, oh – It was too much for most. But it seemed so still, so stable. But it wasn't calm. It was just – distant.

She never told us how she felt about being bound to you. Never even called you by name. Just called you her anchor. The thing weighing her down, tying her to this world and stopping her destiny.

GERTRUDE

Hm. I'm surprised you didn't come for me immediately.

ARTHUR

(wheeze) Come for you? We ended up protecting you, more often than not. Diego was convinced if you died a violent death it would be catastrophic for Agnes. He even talked me around, and I spent decades convincing the others to wait it out. You couldn't outrun age forever. And we had time. But it didn't need to be forever, did it? Just long enough for a messiah to doubt. The sort of doubts that spread to her disciples.

You've never really had to bother with it, do you? You've got him upstairs to point the way as often as not, and the rest of the time you're just figuring out people. Or things that used to be people.

You never try to talk with that Eye of yours. You've never had to second-guess a god. Because that's what it comes down to, isn't it? We feel it's joy and it's anger. It warps us and changes us and feeds on us. Though not in the ways we expect.

The one thing it never does is just… *tell us what to do.* It seeds us with this… aching, impossible desire to change the world, to bring it to us. Then it leaves us to guess and bicker and fight over how the hell you can actually do it. If it's possible.

Sometimes I think they understand us as – little as we understand them. We don't think like they do.

GERTRUDE

(noise of discontent) I'm not actually convinced they *think* at all.

ARTHUR

You might be right. But Agnes did. That's the thing about an – incarnation, isn't it? She was a child and – *person* as much as she was a god. And we messed that right up.e messed that right up.e messed that right up.

I still remember when Diego brought us a book on childcare. *(dry laugh)* Roger's body was still in her room, blackened and smoking from when he tried to feed her. I thought he'd brought me another one of his damn Leitners, but no, it was just a regular old book on looking after children.

I was an idiot. Saw it as… attacking my leadership. Burnt the thing. Diego wasn't happy. *(louder)* Well, he's in charge now. *(lower)* All of us that are left at least. *(louder again)* He can look for answers in whatever books he likes, no skin off my nose.

GERTRUDE

I didn't actually ask.

ARTHUR

(sigh) Figure if you're gonna pull this stuff out of me, might as well get some of it off my chest anyway. *(wheezy laugh)* Not like I can vent to the others about what a prat Diego is. Got a lot of funny

ideas. Still calls the Lightless Flame *Asag*, like he was when he was first researching it. I just really wanna tell him to get over it; I mean Asag was traditionally a force of destruction, sure, but as a church we very much settled on burning in terms of the – face we worship, and some fish-boiling Sumerian demon doesn't really match up, does it? Plus there's a lot of disease imagery with Asag that I'll reckon is way too close to Filth for my taste, but no, he read it in some ancient tome, so that's that –

GERTRUDE

(overlapping) Well, I can't say I –

ARTHUR

(continuing over her) – reckons he always knows best, 'cause he's read a few books, well Big. Deal.

Way I see it, if a writer can't even save themselves, they probably don't have a lot worth knowing. Find me one so-called *"expert"* on all of this who didn't end up regretting it.

That's the trouble with overthinking any of this: You ignore your gut. And to my mind, that's the only part any of them beyond actually care about. They don't give a toss about your rules, or systems. They only care about what feels right, what freezes your belly with terror.

GERTRUDE

(heh) I rather like to think *I've* managed.

[Arthur wheeze-laughs again.]

ARTHUR

Yeah. But you don't actually care about them, do you? Not really. You forget, we've been watching you a long time, and I know you, Gertrude. You don't actually care about the fears. You're too practical. All your energy is focused down here, on monsters, and murderers, and all the things doing the dirty work for them beyond.

You know plenty, sure, but you don't have that – obsession, that stupid urge to try and understand and classify things that use logic and reality like weapons.

GERTRUDE

Hm. Per-Perhaps.

ARTHUR

(small laugh) Always respected you for that. Takes a strong stomach to not give a *shit*.

GERTRUDE

(heh) You'll forgive me if I'm not overjoyed at the compliment.

ARTHUR

Suit yourself.

GERTRUDE

So. Now Diego has taken over; where does that leave you?

ARTHUR

(heh) Slumlording over a nest.

GERTRUDE

Oh. A nest of what?

ARTHUR

Found a mass of the Crawling Rot growing a while back. Managed to get ahold of the property before it became too big. Gotta wait ‘til it blossoms before we can properly burn it.

So ‘til then… just playing landlord.

It’s alright, I suppose. You’d be surprised the misery and pain you can cause when you’ve control over someone’s home. If you’re careful, if you’re smart, you can burn their life to ashes as thoroughly as any fire – and worst comes to worst, you can still do it the old-fashioned way.

Had an elderly tenant last year, oh, she was in a terrible state. I had her trapped, too poor and immobile to do anything but – sit there. Then I broke her boiler, so the cold started to get her.

Not exactly my usual, but… agony is agony. But then her son and his wife moved in with her to help her out. Not much I could do against that. So I just waited until all three were home, and set the place ablaze.

They went up nicely, screaming all the way as the flames started to reach them. Doors were locked, and handles were hot, so they didn't have a chance of escape –

GERTRUDE

Yes, that's – quite enough, I think.

ARTHUR

Oh, I'm sorry. There I was, thinking you *liked* the gory details. My mistake.

GERTRUDE

I think we're just about done here.

ARTHUR

All your burning questions answered?

GERTRUDE

I'm certainly convinced you don't know anything else useful.

ARTHUR

So – I'm free to go? You're not gonna… you know.

GERTRUDE

(laugh, a bit too gleeful) I suppose you'll have to wait and see.

ARTHUR

…Suppose I will.

GERTRUDE

You tell the others. Make sure they know what happened to Eugene.

ARTHUR

Sure. Can't make any promises, though. 'Specially for Jude. She *really* hates you.

GERTRUDE

Tell her she's welcome to try. Oh, and I'm extending my protection to young Mr. Barnabas. They hurt him any more, then what happened to Eugene will seem like a mercy.

ARTHUR

(low, dangerous) You're *really* pushing it, you know that?

GERTRUDE

(audible self-satisfied smirk) Hm. Feel free to push back. *(harder)* But until then, get out of my Archives.

[Arthur inhales for a long time.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE, PRESENT DAY]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) The more I listen, the more it seems to me we're all just – groping about, trying desperately to find out what we're actually meant to be doing.

These things that – loom so large over our lives trap us and push us and – sometimes kill us. But they never actually tell us what we're supposed to be doing. So we scheme and we plot, lash out at each other without ever really knowing why.

I think Gertrude knew this, knew to focus her attention on those parts that could be understood, and – well. And killed.

But I'm really starting to worry that there aren't any answers. Not like I want there to be. There aren't any answers in Ny-Ålesund; there aren't any answers in the past – I've been inside the Buried, and there were no answers there.

Elias always seemed to know what was going on, to have a plan, but… I sometimes wonder how orchestrated some of it really was. *(sigh) (faster)* We've been back in London for just over a week now. I'm – more or less recovered physically; it's just this nagging sense of unease that won't leave me.

I was… so sure I'd find something up there. But instead it was just another broken person trying to come to terms with the wreckage of their life.

And here? I reached out, I took another tape, hoping for a bit of guidance, but – *(short sigh)* To be honest, this hasn't helped.

I did some more digging into Eugene Vanderstock. I thought he was still alive, and – *(inhale)* – working at the steel plant, but it looks like he's just listed on one of the old directory pages on their website.

I really miss having people who know their way around a computer better than I do.

[Long pause.]

ARCHIVIST

A bit more digging found a… rather bizarre case. Apparently he disappeared in late 2009, leaving behind only one thing: a life-sized statue of himself, crafted from candlewax and sawdust. Missing its head.

I wish I didn't know how painful it must be to be alive while your entire being is infused with… agonizing grit. But, as I was investigating, it… came to me.

Eugene is still alive, frozen in place by the razor-sharp particles that are mixed up into what he chose instead of flesh.

I don't know where Gertrude stored his head. But I do know it desperately wants to scream. *(inhale)* Perhaps I c–

[Knock-knock-knock on the door.]

[The door opens.]

GEORGIE

Knock-knock!

ARCHIVIST

Oh – G-Georgie! Wh-What a – You… –

GEORGIE

(overlapping) Oh! Uh, sorry; I thought, um – Is Melanie about?

ARCHIVIST

…Melanie? Uh – Yeah, I saw her a couple of hours ago – Uh, in the other office, I can, I can show you?

GEORGIE

Oh, I'm – sure I can find it. Don't worry yourself.

ARCHIVIST

A-All right. *(incomprehensible noise as he gets his bearings)* W,Why are you, uh, well – here? I-If it's not too personal a question.

[Short pause.]

GEORGIE

It is, a bit. It's not really my place to discuss it.

ARCHIVIST

Ah, oh, therapy! You're taking her to therapy.

GEORGIE

She – told you then?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, yes, yeah.

GEORGIE

Well, you don't need to sound *quite* so psyched about it. *(rustle of clothing)* She gets – nervous traveling there alone.

ARCHIVIST

(inhale) Yes, o-o-of course. I-I forget you two know each other.

[Long silence, during which the Archivist lets a quiet *um* cross his lips.]

GEORGIE

So – *(breaks off, pause)* How are you doing?

ARCHIVIST

I'm… I'm alright. I'm trying to, uh, rest up a bit. Take it easy.

[He exhales.]

GEORGIE

Really? 'Cause – I'm pretty sure I heard talking about a screaming headless corpse just now.

ARCHIVIST

Oh – Oh, were you… listening? –

GEORGIE

Oh, um. Didn't mean to, you know. These doors are not that thick.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. I'm deep in it. Had some – close calls.

GEORGIE

(fast) I'm sorry to hear that. You should probably get some therapy too.

[The Archivist inhales quickly, as if surprised.]

ARCHIVIST

Would you go with me as well?

GEORGIE

…No.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. I thought as much.

GEORGIE

It's the other office, you say.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

GEORGIE

Yeah. Thanks. Take care of yourself.

ARCHIVIST

(long sigh) You, too.

[The door opens.]

ARCHIVIST

End recording.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG146 – Threshold

Statement #0030109

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Marcus McKenzie, regarding a series of unexplored entryways. Original statement given September 1st, 2003. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist. Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

So my dad tells me he's been bothering you with his nonsense? *(sigh)* I just wanted to come over and set things straight. Apologize for any of your time that he might have wasted.

He's… just a lonely old man looking for attention and trying to manipulate me into moving back in with him, even though I've told him so many times that that's just not going to happen. *(sigh)* The doors thing isn't even his, you know? That's what he talked to you about, right? Some magically-appearing door.

Yeah, well, he's just trying to send me a message. Which has been received, loud and clear.

I suppose I do probably owe you some sort of explanation. *(big sigh)* Right.

I'd been living with my parents… a while. I kept moving out, but it never seemed to stick. First was uni – fine, moving in after a degree is normal. Then there was my divorce, back in '93, that landed me back in my old room for a while, then my company went bust about four years ago and wiped out all my savings.

All told, I must have spent most of my twenties, and not a small amount of my thirties, living in that house with my mum and dad.

It was alright, but each time the vibe was worse. My mum was always happy to have me, but she wanted me to move on with my life. But dad was weirdly protective of me, kept trying to keep me around, like he was terrified that the world outside was going to hurt me.

I was – quite depressed, back then, and his attitude put me in a really… weird headspace. I think it comes back to the doors, you know? I think he always secretly thought that I had some deep-seated mental illness, even though they did so many tests, and the doors were the only thing that there ever was – aside from the depression, obviously.

But they were just specific, weird little hallucinations that have long since stopped. Haven't had one in… well, it's not important.

But my dad always thought it was a sign of something deeper, something that was – something that was going to destroy me, someday. So whenever I was living at home, he smothered me, tried desperately to keep me around.

Don't you see? That's what this whole thing has been about; he's been so lonely since mum died, and he's been trying to get me to move back in with him. He's pretending that *he* is starting to see the doors. He thinks that if he starts to share in my "madness," as he always calls it, then I'll be worried about it; I'll stick around.

But I'm not mad, and he's not seeing any doors. I'm sorry he's so lonely, truly, I am – I try to see him as much as I can, but – I have my own life, and I can't be there all the time. And I don't like being manipulated. I don't like being lied to.

The first door I remember seeing that shouldn't have been there, must have been when I was five or six. I had a skipping rope, bright green, old and ratty. I made my mum buy it for me at a car boot sale, and I *loved it.* I could spend hours on the playground, just stood there jumping happily. We weren't really supposed to bring our own toys to school, but no one stopped me.

It was thicker, heavier, than the ones all the other kids had, a proper rope that needed a good bit of strength to really swing. I was fiercely proud of it.

So one night – it was during the Christmas holidays, so I must have been six – I wake up. There's a noise in my room, like something being dragged along the floor. Well, I look over, and in the weak orange glow of my nightlight, I can see the heavy wooden handle of my skipping rope moving slowly across the floorboards and out my bedroom door.

I don't remember panicking. I'm not even sure I was scared, not at that point. But I didn't like anyone except my friends touching my toys, so I got up and hurried to follow.

I chased it sleepily out of my bedroom and down the hall, past the stairs and towards… a doorway I didn't recognize. I was sure that when I'd gone to bed, it'd been a patch of wall, with a painting of an old sailboat on it. But now it was an open doorway.

A small amount of light leaked from around the edges of the door through to my parents room behind me. But it didn't reach very far at all, and beyond the threshold, it was completely dark.

That was when I started to feel scared.

I could see the wooden handle of my skipping rope lying in the corridor, its heavy green cord stretching out and into the door, until it disappeared in the darkness.

I realized I was shaking. I didn't want to go through that door. So I picked up the handle, and started to gently pull on it, try to drag it back out again. Instead of moving, the line went taut. Something was holding the other end, and it was trying to pull me.

For one, awful moment, I found myself frozen in a tug-of-war with whatever was inside that door, clinging desperately to that rope as it stretched away and vanished into blackness. But I was six, and felt myself starting to lose my footing and fall towards it, so I did the only thing I could: I let go, and I watched my most treasured possession disappear forever as the door closed behind it, and I ran

back to bed.

I told my parents, of course, but they didn't believe me. They just thought I'd lost it, and was making up wild stories to cover it up. The wall was the wall again, and the picture of the old sailing boat was back where it should have been.

The next time, I was eleven, and that time, the door wasn't really there. Well, it was, but it was – covered in concrete.

It – It was in this old alleyway, about five minutes walk from my house, and one of the buildings was this abandoned warehouse. I – At least I think it was a warehouse. The wooden signs were rotted away, and the windows had all been broken – and the main layer had been covered in a grey layer of perfectly smooth concrete.

I passed it on the way home from school almost every day, and something about that blank, grey space where a door should have been always gave me a shiver of unease.

Then one day I was walking past, and the door that stole my skipping rope was there. The thing was, though, I couldn't see it, because it was still covered in that concrete, but I *knew* it was there. Before, there'd been nothing behind it, but now, I was certain; now in the center of the concrete were five clear marks, as though someone had pressed their fingers into the mixture when it had still been wet.

I stood there, staring at it like I had all those years ago. It was playing with me again, but this time, it wasn't looking to play with

a skipping rope. This time, it was a dare. It was daring me to put my own hand on that rough concrete, to fit my fingers into the hollow spaces it had made for me, and open it.

It was a windy afternoon, but for that moment the narrow street where I stood was completely still. I could feel the muscles in my arm tensing, preparing to stretch towards it, to accept the dare from a door that had hidden itself so sneakily under all that concrete.

Then my friend Luke yelled at me from the end of the street. The fear was gone in a second, and I ran to catch up with him. I did, however, make the mistake of telling my parents about it, and reminding them of the other time it had happened when I was six.

This time, they didn't dismiss it so quickly. First, they checked the alleyway, and took some pictures of the solid, unmarked concrete of the covered entry. Then, they began to make appointments, and sent me to specialists. I was tested and poked and quizzed and prodded all through my teenage years.

I never believed I was delusional, not like that, no matter what my father said, and neither, it seemed, did the doctors – at least, not in any way they could prove. Every test, every examination seemed to reinforce the fact that there was nothing medically unusual about me or my mind.

The only evidence to the contrary was the fact that I – kept seeing the door.

When I was thirteen, it was underneath a railway bridge. It was

huge and metal this time, with solid iron bolts sealing it shut and a thick chain stretched across it. The warning stickers had long since scrubbed off, and someone had scrawled in chalk “WARNING: Danger of Death.”

As I passed, something heavy began to bang on the side, sending the chain dancing. It pounded again and again, and I didn’t know if it was trying to force its way out, or politely knocking, hoping to be let in.

When I was fifteen, I pressed the doorbell for Sandra’s house, picking her up for our first date, and I realized that it sounded wrong, like the doorbell was echoing through a hundred empty corridors, bouncing back and forth and lingering in the air. I looked again at their front door, and realized that it didn’t lead to their house.

I heard footsteps approaching on the other side from the far distance, fast and steady, but getting closer. I turned and ran, just as I heard the door open behind me.

When I was sixteen, I was stumbling home drunk from a house party, and I found it lying open in the ground in front of me. It was wide, waiting, and I could see a long corridor stretching down and away, at a right angle to the world as I knew it, turning off into an angular labyrinth.

I was trying so hard to walk carefully, to seem like I wasn’t drunk, that I almost didn’t notice it until it was too late. I stared into it for

a long time, my eyes hazy from cheap vodka, and I saw a shape walking calmly along the vertical floor.

When I was eighteen, I was driving a group of friends to a concert in Leeds when we pulled into a service station to get some lunch. *They* didn't hear the scream coming from the small stone structure just next to where all the coaches parked. They didn't see the drag marks that led across the tarmac and under the door.

I didn't eat lunch that day.

The last time was the worst. It hadn't happened for almost fifteen years, and when I saw it, I almost wept.

It was when I was living in Oxford, up Cowley Way. A few streets over, there was an empty plot of land, just scrubby plants and junk. If there'd ever been a house there, it was long gone. A few of the older residents said it burned down in the seventies, but they were always… real weird about it. I passed it whenever I was heading down to get a drink at the City Arms.

The last week before I had to move back in with my parents, I was at my lowest point. I was bankrupt in all but name, the work of almost half a decade flushed down the toilet, and all that remained of my worldly possessions were packed up for yet another return to childhood.

And as I passed that empty space of grass, there it was: a pale yellow door, stood all alone, like the entrance to a house that I just couldn't see. It had no frame around it, but I was sure that if I

grasped its handle and twisted, it would still swing open, silent and inviting.

This wasn't like before; there was no playfulness here, none of that malicious joy that I had always felt coming off it. Now there was just a cold hunger, a deep anger, as though I had no right to just stand there looking at it. The street was silent, but I could feel it *screaming* at me to open it.

I just about managed to not to. I was just about able to walk away.

I'm… sorry; I didn't mean to get so deep into my issues. I'm not mad; I know that. It's just, this door is something else. And my father knows that; it's why he used it as a cornerstone of his little story, but it's just – pretend. He just wants me to move back in with him. And I can't. I just – can't.

Sometimes you just have to leave. Even if what's on the other side scares you.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends. *(long sigh)*

So it seems we did have Marcus McKenzie's statement after all. I spent so long looking for it, back when I found his father's and – *(long inhale)* – no luck.

But now I decide to start looking properly into Hill Top Road, and all of a sudden I'm drawn to rearrange a filing cabinet, and what do I find behind it?

I never thought I'd miss those days, when I could throw out some half-baked speculation about drug abuse or mental illness and *whoosh* – away all the statements went.

There is nothing in the world more reassuring than ignorance, which we can mistake for certainty.

But no. Almost every one of those statements, those – people. That poor old man.

Like I can talk. Like I'm in any position to mourn the suffering of the innocent.

But there is one thing I know an awful lot better now, than I did when I read his father's statement:

I know an awful lot more about *doors*.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[EXT. HELEN'S DOOR]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The Archivist bangs impatiently on Helen's door, breaths heaving, until Helen indeed opens it.]

HELEN

You rang?

[There's a persistent static in the background from the moment the door opens.]

ARCHIVIST

Marcus McKenzie. Why didn't you tell me?

HELEN

Is that name supposed to mean something to me?

ARCHIVIST

(half laugh, half shudder) No. I suppose it wouldn't. Just an old man and his son for you to terrorize and feast on.

HELEN

(all business) Oh, well; the son, I was pursuing long before I was even Michael. And technically, I didn't eat the old man. He passed away from terror long before I got a chance to open properly.

ARCHIVIST

His son Marcus – he – he was fine when I read his father's statement two years ago, but now, suddenly, I can't get through to him.

HELEN

No. I imagine not. I decided it was time to finish that game a few

months ago.

ARCHIVIST

You – *Why?*

HELEN

Not sure. I suppose Helen didn't have quite the same attachment to him as a *project*. I'm not quite as much for decades-long campaigns of subtle terror these days.

ARCHIVIST

(soft) That's horrible.

HELEN

Is it? We do what we need to do when it comes to feeding, don't we? *(pointed) Don't* we, Archivist?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

HELEN

It would be better if you embraced it.

ARCHIVIST

It's not – Look, why were you trying to lure him into Hill Top Road?

HELEN

That? Oh. Well. That was just curiosity. I wanted to see what would happen.

ARCHIVIST

I don't understand.

HELEN

There is something *wrong* with Hill Top Road. You know it as well as I do. Some strange scar on reality at the center of – whatever it is that the Spider is spinning.

When young Mr. McKenzie passed, it seemed like a good opportunity for an experiment, to see what would happen if I lured him inside.

But it seems I just don't have the Web's gift for manipulation. Persuasion.

ARCHIVIST

Were you controlled?

HELEN

What a delightful thought. *(short pause)* I don't believe so, no. But the Spider's strings are subtle, so I suppose it's not *im*possible. Why?

ARCHIVIST

I, I want to know: Can the Web control another avatar, one that

serves a different power?

[Helen begins to laugh.]

ARCHIVIST

Make them do things they don't want to, make them –

[He breaks off; Helen is clearly getting to him.]

ARCHIVIST

– find victims, feed –

[Helen keeps laughing.]

HELEN

Oh, perhaps. Perhaps not. Would that make life easier for you? Are you so sure you didn't want to?

[The Archivist starts breathing harder and heavier, as Helen erupts back into laughter. She closes the door behind her.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, ARCHIVIST'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST

Been a while since you've all come to see me together. I assume it's not good news.

DAISY

No.

MELANIE

(spitting) What the *hell* have you been doing, John?

BASIRA

(cold, cold anger) Martin left a tape for us.

ARCHIVIST

And what exactly is on this t–

[He cuts off; Basira's pulled the tape out, and one way or another, he knows what's on it.]

ARCHIVIST

(exhale) Oh.

MELANIE

Yes.

BASIRA

How many?

ARCHIVIST

Basira… I –

BASIRA

How many?

[Short pause.]

ARCHIVIST

Four.

MELANIE

Jesus.

BASIRA

Including the one on the boat?

DAISY

What one on the boat?

ARCHIVIST

Including Floyd? Five.

MELANIE

Jesus!

BASIRA

Do I even want to know?

MELANIE

I do.

[The Archivist sighs.

ARCHIVIST

Jess Tyrell, the woman on the tape – *(sigh)* – she was the fourth. I – I just tried to – I was weak. R-Ravenous, I,I,I didn't feel –

The first was a supermarket cleaner, um, ended up lost for a week in an endless warehouse.

[In the background, we hear Melanie sigh.]

ARCHIVIST

I didn't even – I, I just went in for some shopping, and he was there, and I just – asked. *(inhale)* The second was… it was after I got stabbed by Melanie.

MELANIE

You are *not* putting this on me –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) No, that's not what I meant. *(shaky inhale)* I was walking the streets; I – I thought I was trying to clear my head…

DAISY

But you were hunting.

ARCHIVIST

Apparently. I, I found a woman who, every year on her birthday, wakes up in a fresh grave, just for her.

DAISY

And the third was after the coffin.

ARCHIVIST

A man rejected by all who knew him, *(inhale)* searching ever-darker places for love. When he told me his story, he started weeping maggots.

BASIRA

Enough.

[In the background, Melanie makes a disgusted noise.]

ARCHIVIST

I hope so.

MELANIE

(exhale) Why didn't you record them?

BASIRA

Why do you think? Because he was ashamed.

ARCHIVIST

(immediately) No; I-I mean, I don't record anything anymore, not, not really; I just sort of assume they'll turn on if it's important.

BASIRA

Well, they didn't.

ARCHIVIST

No, I suppose not.

[Silence, uncomfortable and tight.]

[Melanie eventually breaks it with a sigh.]

MELANIE

So. What do we do now?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know.

BASIRA

You're a danger, John. A monster. You're hurting innocent people.

ARCHIVIST

So did Daisy.

BASIRA

Shut up. It's not the same thing at all.

DAISY

Basira. He has a point.

BASIRA

You didn't know what you were doing.

[Daisy makes a pained sound, as if to contradict her, but stops.]

BASIRA

And since you did, you've spent every waking hour resisting. He knows exactly what he's doing.

ARCHIVIST

I don't – It's not that simple, i-i-it feels – *(pause as he finds his words)* I don't know if I can control it; I don't know if it's even me doing it.

BASIRA

So you say you're being controlled.

ARCHIVIST

I-I don't know. Maybe. Th-The Web, i–

BASIRA

(overlapping) What, What was the name you said before? Annabelle Cane.

ARCHIVIST

…Yes, uh, she's – she's been watching us, I'm pretty sure of it.

MELANIE

John, I – I'm not sure that it's actually the –

BASIRA

(overlapping) No. No, if he is being controlled, we need to know. And we need to know **now**. Do you know where she is?

ARCHIVIST

(struggling) N-Not – Not properly, I,I – I think she has some connection to Hill Top Road.

BASIRA

Then we go. Now. Unless, anyone has any objections?

[Lots of exhaling and rustling in the background. Melanie begins to say something, but –]

ARCHIVIST

Not from me.

BASIRA

(overlapping) You don't get a vote.

MELANIE

Uh, okay, seriously – *I'm* going to have to be the one to point out that this is a *terrible* idea.

BASIRA

(determined inhale) Daisy?

DAISY

Be better if we could prepare.

MELANIE

I-I just think – that – we shouldn't be exposing ourselves like this until we have a little bit more than a hunch.

ARCHIVIST

She does have a point.

MELANIE

I – didn't ask you.

[John sighs.]

BASIRA

'kay, fine, I'll go, then. I'll do some recon on my own, and update you.

[As she speaks, she pushes out of her seat and heads for the door.]

MELANIE

Wait, hang on!

DAISY

Basira…

BASIRA

I'll tell you all what I find. **Don't** let him eat anyone's brain while I'm gone.

ARCHIVIST

(sullen) That's *not* what I do.

[Basira opens the door.]

MELANIE

B-Basira – Come, come on.

[Basira leaves, shutting the door behind her.]

[Melanie sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

Well, that was…

DAISY AND MELANIE

Shut up.

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

(half a question, half statement) So, we're going with her.

DAISY

(sigh) Come on, Mel. I'll see if I've got a stab vest in your size.

[Melanie pushes out of her seat as she talks.]

MELANIE

Yeah. Sure.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG147 – Weaver

Statement #0182007

[INT. OXFORD, 105 HILL TOP ROAD]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

BASIRA

Heads up.

ARCHIVIST

The tape.

[A couple of footsteps.]

BASIRA

Something's here.

MELANIE

No *shit!* Look at this place.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[There's a sound like a door being closed in the background; it seems like someone, likely Daisy, is checking over the house. The Archivist sighs. As he does:]

MELANIE

When did you say they finished rebuilding?

ARCHIVIST

2008?

[More footsteps.]

ARCHIVIST

Doesn't look like anyone ever moved in, though.

BASIRA

So this is – ten years of cobwebs?

DAISY

More than that.

[Footsteps.

MELANIE

(heavy sarcasm) No, I'm sure this is just the normal number of webs

that grow up organically.

BASIRA

So – where are all the spiders?

MELANIE

I – I mean, they *hide*.

[More footsteps.]

MELANIE

You know, it's a thing they do, spiders; they hide.

DAISY

Perhaps they bugged out.

[Slight pause, but for footsteps.]

ARCHIVIST

Was that a *joke?*

BASIRA

John, focus. Are you getting any sense of anything? Can you… See anything?

ARCHIVIST

No, I'm just seeing what you're seeing. Still a bit weak from my trip up north, to be honest.

MELANIE

(drier than the Sahara) Sorry we couldn't stop for a *snack*.

[Basira snickers. The Archivist sighs.]

[Footsteps again, and Daisy hands them all something.]

DAISY

Here, Mel.

MELANIE

What even are these?

DAISY

Magnesium flares. Technically not legal anymore; if you need more, just shout.

MELANIE

Oh. Fine. Uh – and, and – please don't call me Mel.

DAISY

What? Since when?

MELANIE

Always. I'm – *(sigh)* – trying to be more open about this stuff.

DAISY

Roger wilco, Miss King.

MELANIE

(hm) Better.

[A door opens.]

BASIRA

These flares going to work?

DAISY

No idea, but John said the Web doesn't get on great with fire, and we don't exactly have a flamethrower, so –

BASIRA

I mean, at least until we find the one Gertrude stocked up.

[Someone shakily exhale-laughs in the background.]

BASIRA

Right next to the nukes.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sure the flares will work fine. *(slight pause)* I mean, un, unless it's all an elaborate plan to have us burn this place down again.

BASIRA

So what if it is?

ARCHIVIST

I don't follow.

BASIRA

I mean, anything we do could be part of the "grand master plan." So, what – we do nothing? Just sit on our hands and hope that's not what the Spider wants?

[The Archivist sighs. But it's Melanie that jumps in:]

MELANIE

Right, sure, but it *wouldn't* hurt to have a *bit* more of a plan, would it?

ARCHIVIST

Exactly.

BASIRA

You want to come back later?

MELANIE

(insistent/explosive) Yes! That's what I said, isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

(large sigh) Well, we're here now. Might as well push on.

MELANIE

(narrowed eyes) Famous last words.

[Another door is opened; Daisy emerges and shuts it behind her.]

DAISY

Clear. Looks like nothing downstairs.

BASIRA

You wanna – take a moment before we head up?

ARCHIVIST

What about the basement?

DAISY

Can't see one.*

[* As a matter of course, music cues tend not to be noted in episode transcripts. However, the cue of high, tremulous violin

that comes in the moment Daisy finishes speaking is both surprising and, subsequently, chilling enough that I felt it ought to be mentioned here.]

ARCHIVIST

Huh.

DAISY

You want me to take point?

ARCHIVIST

Uh – no. No, I've, I've got it.

[They all begin to take the stairs; the Archivist's steps are heavy, and the stairs creak under his weight. As he continues climbing, breaths coming heavy, a strangely familiar voice begins to resolve from the background.]

ARCHIVIST

You hear that?

BASIRA

No, I don't hear –

MELANIE

(shushes vigorously) Yes! Room on the left.

[The voice resolves completely.]

[It's the Archivist.]

[His voice is clearly on tape, and it soon becomes clear that the recording playing is that of case #0122204 *(MAG #1: "Anglerfish.")*]

[The following excerpt plays, and gains in volume, as the others speak over it:]

ARCHIVIST *(RECORDING)*

– organisation dedicated to academic research into the esoteric and the paranormal. The head of the Institute, Mr. Elias Bouchard, has employed me to replace the previous Head Archivist, one Gertrude Robinson, who has recently passed away.

MELANIE

Is that? –

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

Don't touch it.

ARCHIVIST

It's alright.

[He steels himself with a bracing breath, hesitates for a moment, then – turns the tape off.]

DAISY

Something underneath it.

ARCHIVIST

I see it. Uh – Hand me that brush?

[He begins to retrieve the object.]

BASIRA

Is – that what I think it is?

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) Yep.

[He holds the object up; we hear it rustle.]

ARCHIVIST

Official Institute paper and everything.

[He exhales.]

BASIRA

Goddamnit.

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Annabelle Cane. She left it for us.

MELANIE

Honestly don't know what else you guys were *expecting.*

BASIRA

Well, that's it, then.

[The Archivist lets out a shaky breath.]

BASIRA

Come on, let's finish up and get out of here.

ARCHIVIST

I – I mean – Are we burning it?

MELANIE

The statement or the building?

DAISY

Both?

BASIRA

Don't tempt me.

[The girls all laugh.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. OXFORD, 105 HILL TOP ROAD, UPSTAIRS TAPE ROOM.]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of – *(sigh)* – *Annabelle Cane*. Regarding her history and her observations of the Magnus Institute, London. Original statement written 20th July, 2018. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist. Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Free will is a funny old thing, isn't it John? Can I call you John? I'm going to call you John.

Such a strange concept, woven from a thousand different ignorances and experiences, a faculty we only ever truly ascribe to ourselves, and – I suppose, to our gods.

With any other animal, we talk about instinct, we talk about

training; perhaps, if we have spent enough time with them, we talk about personality. But we never talk about *choice*. We never look at a dog chasing wildly after a thrown ball and think “What an odd decision that dog has made.”

We talk about workings of its mind, and instincts; if it doesn’t chase the ball, we wonder why: Is it sick, is it tired? Perhaps something in the nature of this particular breed, this particular dog, makes it prone to ignoring a game of fetch.

The idea of a dog simply *choosing* not to chase feels deeply unnatural. Is it even capable of legitimately making a decision; some would say no.

Of course, people are very different from dogs. Our brains are larger. More complex. So many more little factors and wrinkles to push us and pull us – but does any of that actually constitute free will?

Free of what? We all have forces that drive us, circumstances that direct us, and even if we choose to ignore these and act against all logic, just to prove that we *can* – is that not simply allowing the existential terror of our own powerlessness to control us instead?

Scans show decisions are made by your brain long before your conscious mind even has a chance to register them. Most of one’s life is simply spent looking back and convincing yourself that you chose deliberately to act like you did.

Hm. Have you ever read *War and Peace,* John? I know, I know; I

had to read an extract for a literature class once, ended up reading the whole thing.

Another life.

It's not actually as boring as people say, and its central thesis is that the tiniest, most insignificant factors can control the destiny of the world.

In its post-script, Tolstoy muses on the concept of free will, on whether or not *he* really believes in it. He ultimately decides that if all the millions upon millions of factors that weigh upon our choices were fully and completely known, then all could be foreseen and predetermined.

But, he argues, it is quite impossible for the human mind to comprehend even a fraction of these. And in that vast, dark space of ignorance lies: free will.

Isn't that marvelous, John? Free will is simply ignorance. It's just the name we give to the fact that no one can ever really see everything that controls them.

Of course, that's not the real crux of the free will question that's bothering you at the moment, is it? I think that one probably comes down to whether or not you're *choosing* to continue reading this statement out loud.

You didn't mean to, did you? No, I'm sure you told Basira and Melanie that you were going to glance over it and report back;

perhaps they asked you if you were going to record, and you shook your head: maybe later.

That sounds like the sort of thing you'd say.

But think about it, John; when's the last time you were able to read a statement quietly to yourself without instinctively hitting record and speaking it aloud? Is it just instinct, habit? Or is it a compulsion, a string pulled by the Ceaseless Watcher or the Mother of Puppets?

Or both?

I know the summaries have started to confuse you; where did they come from, when you read a statement fresh? How do you just – know what it's about, before you even start to read it?

But by then you're away; the roller coaster is dropping, and you've no real choice but to hold on and hope that – *I don't crash you*.

I'm afraid I don't actually have these answers for you; *I've* simply been… watching. I'm sure you understand that.

Maybe I've occasionally been nudging something here and there to keep you safe, to keep everything on track. But I know you've been more worried about your choices, about whether you're being controlled by me, or by the Mother.

So I thought perhaps I should leave a little something to reassure you that, yes, your actions and choices have all been your own.

Have they been controlled? No more than gravity controls you when you walk, or hunger controls you when you choose your meal. There are certainly new forces, new instincts and desires, that shape your actions; perhaps you're unprepared for them.

But if you choose to believe in a free will, then yes: All you have done has been of your own free will. They have all been your choices.

Now, I believe the tradition is to tell you the story of my life, the sinister path that led me to the sorry state in which I now find myself.

Well, let it never be said that I do not dance the steps I am assigned.

I was born into what most would consider a large family. My father worked constantly, and my mother was overwhelmed, leaving some of the older children to watch over the younger ones. Some rose to this responsibility; others deeply resented it and took no pains to hide the fact.

I was one of the youngest, and it soon became clear to my infant mind that in order to get anywhere, the key was to navigate the baroque family politics in which I found myself.

I became very good at it. I would instigate fights between siblings if I needed them in trouble. If I required sympathy, I would bite myself until I drew blood, and then blame it on my sister Lizzie. I discovered a deep and enduring talent inside myself for lying.

My manipulations were not intricate, but they were far beyond what was expected of a child my age, and I have always believed that the key to manipulating people is to ensure that they always under- or over-estimate you. Never reveal your true abilities or plans.

Of course, I learned many of my skills from my mother, who could wield guilt like a rapier and anger like a scalpel. She never simply screamed at you. She was always aware of exactly what kind of fury or disappointment was needed to make sure you regretted ever catching her attention. She had eight children, yet weaved that life around herself in such a way that she always seemed both the victim of it, yet curiously divorced of any responsibility.

In many ways, she was the victim, at least of my father, whose pathological absence spoke of a man who had no interest whatsoever in engaging with the life where he had trapped his family.

However well I had learned my lessons, it was clear that happiness was not something I could have; within that family there was simply too much that I couldn't control.

My biggest attempt to assert some sort of influence over my family was when I decided to run away. In my childish mind, I was certain that my disappearance would destabilize the entire family unit, allowing me to take my rightful place as the most important child upon my return.

An infantile fantasy, perhaps, but one I was keen to realize. I intended to stay away for two days and two nights. I took a backpack and filled it with as much food as I could carry *(which was barely enough for a decent lunch,)* my favorite blanket, and the only book I could say belonged to only me: *Five Go Down to the Sea*. And then I left.

We lived in Hunstanton, in Norfolk, about twenty minutes walk from the beach, and it was late spring, so I wasn't at all worried about the temperature.

I had chosen where I was to spend the two days I disappeared some weeks before. The air was warm and humid as I snuck out of the house, filled with that slight scent of salt that even now, changed as I am, I sometimes find myself missing here, in the grimy air of London.

If you walked down the short hill from Hunstanton Town Centre and towards the beach, and took a right just before you reached it, you could find yourself on a small stretch of sand that seemed oddly quiet.

Most days, it was completely deserted, and even on those holidays where the number of sunbathers was so high no part of the beach could fully escape them, it would only have a handful of dedicated loungers lying around, quietly reading and studiously ignoring their own unease.

Exactly why it remained like that and no one seemed to notice –

still a mystery to me, even now. But whatever the cause, it was a shunned place, and sitting on the side of the road above it, casting a thick, angular shadow, was the squat brick structure of the old chip shop.

I'd never seen it open. No one had, as far as I could tell. It was painted a dark blue, that never quite matched any color of sky that was behind it, and had a hand-lettered sign that could still be seen covering much of the bare left hand wall in curling, faded typeface.

CHIPS, it said.

The old chip shop had been around longer than I'd been alive, probably longer, and its silent one-story silhouette had always unsettled me. It was only looking back that I realized how few windows it had: Just one, tiny panel of glass either side of the big doors. The rest of the structure was just – plain, unadorned brickwork.

I don't really know why I decided to hide there, but assuming you've been paying attention, I'm sure you understand by now how little that means. Perhaps deep down, I simply knew it would be unlocked.

The sun was setting by the time I reached it, and if there had been any tourists trying to enjoy the beach in that place, they were long since gone. I was utterly alone, the only sound a few distant seagulls screaming to be fed as they circled aimlessly looking for food.

Against the vivid red-orange of the sky, the old chip shop seemed almost black, like a fallen obelisk. A light rain began to patter down, and I, not having had the foresight to pack an umbrella, ran to it.

I opened the door as quickly and quietly as I could. Inside it was warm and dry, and dust coated everything. I struggled more than once not to sneeze, something I was convinced would somehow alert my family to where I was. So I crawled under one of the counters, and soon enough, sleep had come for me.

I awoke to the sound of rhythmic clattering, the noise of wood striking wood in a complex, intricate pattern. I got up, more curious than fearful at that moment, and took few, tentative steps towards it.

The sound seemed to be coming from one of the back rooms, and seeing as how light seeped from only one of the doors, it seemed to me pretty obvious which room contained my answer.

So I went inside. Another action which, looking back after the fact, I found myself pleasingly baffled by.

Inside was a young woman I did not recognize, sat at what I would later learn was an old-fashioned wooden loom. Her eyes and face were sunken, her hands and arms a blur as the machine pressed on. They arced over and through the loom, and I could see much of her inner forearms and legs were covered in tiny holes, small red pinpricks like insect bites.

Looking back, of course, and remembering the crunch of used syringes beneath my feet, I realize that addiction is one of the strongest vectors of control there is.

The woman looked up at me, disinterested, and I saw that the threads of the loom were laced into her skin, all through her track marks, and that dozens of spiders ran up and down those weaving threads and scurried in and out of the holes in her skin.

Her eyes met mine, and traveled upwards towards the ceiling. I followed her gaze for barely five seconds before I fled home, and abandoned my plans to run away entirely.

I may have decided not to describe what I saw up there. I will only say that it is what engendered in me that terror of spiders which eventually led to my volunteering at Surrey University!

I will simply say that – when a spider reaches a certain size, it is often not entirely made up of *spider* anymore.

So how much free will was involved in that story? What could I have chosen to change? Would a different path have been possible?

I felt no loss of control, no puppet strings guided me. And yet, the Mother got exactly the result she no doubt wanted, one that would lead to a fear of spiders so acute that I could later have that horror focused and refined into a silk-spun apotheosis.

Unless, of course, none of it was intentional. None of it was planned. The Mother is the fear of manipulation and lost control

made manifest. So perhaps it is our fear that projects her influence on everything that happens.

Like the mind: retrospectively assigning reason to our actions, so we fit whatever occurs into the neatest pattern we can, and declare her web both intricate and complete.

Perhaps she is no more active than Terminus, simply sitting and reveling in the inevitable cascade of paranoia, as those who hold her in special terror cocoon themselves in red string and theory.

Or perhaps I am simply telling you what you need to hear in order to ensure you behave exactly as the Mother wishes you to.

Perhaps I have never even seen a beach.

[A light static turns on in the background.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Don't go to Hill Top Road again.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

That was, uh… I didn't – I, I, I didn't like that. I couldn't –

[He cuts himself off, seems to struggle, then makes a frustrated noise.]

ARCHIVIST

So. She is watching the Institute. Interfering with things. *(slight soft gasp, more of frustration than surprise)* Is that reassuring, or merely really bad?

I can't say I'm… I can't say I'm sad to have another ally allegedly on our side, but I don't like the idea of being important to the Web.

That's a really bad place to be.

Annabelle's right, though. I mean, I can't trust anything she says to not be another lie to further manipulate and maneuver us, but deep down I think she's right.

What I've been doing to these people, it – it hasn't been because I was puppeted, or controlled, or possessed.

I wanted to do it. It felt good.

But at least I know I *can* stop; I just – don't know how. I – *(he sighs)* I don't – *want* to stop. *(ugh)* Goddamn, this one really took it out of me. I need to go lie down. *(uh)* End recording.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG148 – Extended Surveillance

Statement #0110304

[CLICK]

ELIAS

Good evening, Detective.

[BASIRA IMMEDIATELY ASSAULTS HIM.]

Ow!

BASIRA

Useless, scheming piece of shit!

ELIAS

– Detective, this is quite unnecessary –

[ANGRY NOISE]

[FURTHER VIOLENCE]

BASIRA

I'm sorry, was *that* unnecessary?

ELIAS

Ow!

BASIRA

Because *this* is the most helpful you've been so far!

Unless you've got another crisis for me.

ELIAS

[gasping] No, no, no – it's fine… I'm sorry?

BASIRA

Oh, yeah? For which part?

ELIAS

…all of it?

BASIRA

You sent us to the North *fucking* Pole for no goddamn reason!

ELIAS

A, um, miscalculation –

BASIRA

No, no, I'm done with your game –

ELIAS

That's – Basira –

BASIRA

And when exactly were you planning to tell us he's been feeding on innocents?!

ELIAS

– I've – I've always thought that a man's eating habits were his own private business –

BASIRA

Mm-hm.

ELIAS

– but… I can see how maybe I should have mentioned it.

BASIRA

Or that we were being stalked by some freaky spider woman? Don't tell me you didn't know about that.

ELIAS

Uh, yes, well, to be honest I – I'd advise you to leave that one well alone.

BASIRA

Oh, yeah?

ELIAS

Look, look – I've been doing this a long time now, and if there's one thing I've learned about the Web, it's that it plays its own game. All you can really do is hope it doesn't get in the way of whatever your plan is. Because the Spider usually wins.

Assuming you have a plan.

Do you have a plan, Detective?

BASIRA

Why do you do that? What is that?

ELIAS

Do what?

BASIRA

You always call me "Detective." Is that supposed to mean something?

ELIAS

Honestly, I just like the way it sounds.

BASIRA

[exasperated noise]

So: why did you agree to see me?

ELIAS

I missed you.

BASIRA

Right. That's why you've been refusing my visits since we got back.

ELIAS

I thought it might have… been an idea to give you some space.

BASIRA

Oh? And how'd that work out for you?

ELIAS

Um, not ideally?

BASIRA

So what now? Another wild goose chase? More gloating about John's "destiny?" Because right now, I'm having a real hard time figuring out why I shouldn't just tell them to throw your little deal out the window, and see how you do in here without special treatment.

ELIAS

I mean, you have plenty of reasons to do that, of course, but I'm not

sure that they have any reason to listen to you.

BASIRA

I'll make them listen.

ELIAS

Will you? You're not police anymore. You've done them some favors, but they've done you some, as well. And I think you'll find the information that I've been giving to them has been far more consistently useful. You want to issue an ultimatum? go right ahead. I'm just not sure it'll go quite how you hope.

And, um, no more violence, Detective. Or I may have to call in the guards.

BASIRA

So that's it, then.

ELIAS

As far as I can tell, you have no interest in anything I have to say, and maybe came here to let off some steam – so, yes, that's probably it.

BASIRA

Surprised you didn't foresee it.

ELIAS

Well, that's always been my problem. Ever the optimist.

BASIRA

You know, when you have no more useful information and they're done with you –

ELIAS

You'll kill me. Yes. I'm sorry to say it, Detective, but you're becoming predictable.

BASIRA

[exasperated noise]

ELIAS

Goodbye, Detective. I shall miss our little chats.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Well?

BASIRA

Just useless gloating. Like I said he would.

ARCHIVIST

You should have let me come with.

BASIRA

No. Besides, he wouldn't have seen me if I had.

ARCHIVIST

I can't believe you've been seeing him all this time.

BASIRA

Oh, yeah. *That's* the terrible secret sabotaging the trust between us.

ARCHIVIST

[huff]

…Did he mention it at all…? My, uh…

BASIRA

Oh, your new diet? Nothing useful. Didn't seem too fazed by it.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

BASIRA

What.

ARCHIVIST

I don't know – I mean, we still don't really know what Elias actually is? I thought maybe if he was more like me than we realize…

BASIRA

He might have some advice?

ARCHIVIST

Stupid, I know…

BASIRA

Yeah. John, We've been over this. the key is to *not* force people to feed you their trauma. You know – just don't do it?

ARCHIVIST

It's not that simple.

BASIRA

No. It is. Or I put you down.

ARCHIVIST

…

I mean, that's hardly –

BASIRA

Daisy's been managing.

ARCHIVIST

Daisy is… yeah. She's managing.

Did he say anything about Annabelle?

BASIRA

Not really. Sounds like he's not too worried, though. Says to just ignore it.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, good luck with that.

BASIRA

Any luck finding her?

ARCHIVIST

I haven't really been trying. Doing that sort of thing consciously… makes me hungry.

BASIRA

Oh, well then: find a statement to your tastes, and read it.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, yes, I know, thank you.

…Basira?

BASIRA

Yeah?

ARCHIVIST

I have been meaning to ask: the tape, the one of the uh… my victim. You said Martin gave it to you.

BASIRA

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

How was he? How did he look – was he – uh –

BASIRA

[interrupting; sounding slightly less harsh] I don't know. I didn't see him. He just left it on my desk with a note.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Right.

BASIRA

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Can I ask what it said?

BASIRA

Um, yeah. It said, uh. “Talk to him”

ARCHIVIST

[harsh breathing/sobbing sounds]

I’m gonna get something to eat.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Sunil Maraj regarding their work as a security guard and the disappearance of their co-worker, Samson Stiller. Original statement given 3rd April, 2011. Audio recording by Jonathan Simms, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

So I lost my job last week. I mean, I quit, they didn’t fire me or nothing. But you know how like sometimes you quit because you want to, and sometimes you quit because you’ve got to? Well, this was the second, although I’m not gonna pretend I’m not glad to see

the back of the place.

It's 'cause I kept asking about Samson, you know? And what I saw. And they really, really don't want me to make a stink about that. Because if he just disappeared one day, didn't come into work, that's fine – I mean, not fine for his family, obviously, or the police who have to find him, but fine for the company. If he disappeared at work, though – if what I think happened is even close to what actually happened – then that's real bad news for them, and opens them up to all sorts of lawsuits and liability.

I mean, it's fine, I can get other jobs, and it's not like I really want to be working there after what happened, but I just wish someone would take it seriously. It's messed up, and I'm having a real hard time getting out of my head.

So, I work security right? Used to be, a company or shop would have its own little security force they put together, did all the in-store and CCTV vigilance stuff. These days, it's all centralized, though. You tend to have a building or a shopping central contract all the security work out to a single company, who'll then cover all the businesses or shops. It's easier, from a centralizing point of view, and cheaper, if that's what the owners like.

But it does mean that there tends to be a lot less stability and how it's all structured, personnel-wise, at least. If you're lucky, you'll be assigned to a post and stay there for years, getting to know the place, the systems, your co-workers. If you're unlucky, or there's contract difficulties, you could easily end up moving through two or

three different places in as many months.

That was kind of the case for me and Samson. We were the odd men out in a lot of ways. We'd originally been brought in for a big corporate office block near Liverpool Street, but there'd been some problem and the whole place had to be closed up for months. Samson said they found asbestos, I heard it was a lease issue, but it doesn't really matter. Point is, they hired us for a job that no longer existed.

I expected they'd just get rid of us, but I mean to their credit, they did try to do right. They did their best to fit us in with other security teams: I mean, over the last two years we did a couple of data centers, a digital marketing hub – whatever that is – three different office buildings near Kings Cross… trouble was, every time, almost as soon as we got there, there'd be some personnel changes, or expiring contracts, or some other trouble, and generally, as the last in the door, we were the first to get reassigned. Started to feel a bit like we were cursed, you know?

Samson took it harder than I did. I mean, I'm young, my mum's got a flat in Hackney, and to be honest, most of my evenings are out with friends or in with black ops, so the moving around was pretty much fine with me. Sam had a three-year-old, though, and lived way down in Morden, so being thrown from one post to another all the time was really kind of getting to him. He tried to talk to me about it a few times, but honestly, we weren't that close. Or rather, we were close because we'd always worked together, but we didn't have a huge amount in common. I mean, I tried to talk to him about

football for a while, but I think he could tell I was talking out of my ass. Anyway, point is, when we were reassigned to a shopping centre in Stratford, he wasn't in a great place.

Now, I'm not sure I can legally name the shopping center I was working in to you guys, but let's just say it wasn't the Westfield. It was old, clearly been around decades, and the security systems really showed it. I mean, one of the shops still had the original alarms from the late 70s, and plenty of them still had cameras that recorded to VHS, for God's sake.

The security office was a mess. The company I worked for – again, dunno if I can legally say them, but you can look it up, you know – they have a package where they replace all your equipment and systems with the stuff we use. It's not cheap, but it's worth it, if only because we all know exactly how to use that stuff.

Whoever was running this shopping center had very much not opted for that particular contract. I mean, the teams before us had made a valiant effort to centralize and integrate all the feeds and setups into just the one control room, but… damn, that place was a mess. Flat screens, next to banks of old CRT monitors that some of the cameras had to feed into, next to racks of channel banks, and a few actual, honest-to-god computers, that tried their best to wrestle everything into something that was almost usable.

I found it properly overwhelming, didn't like the place at all. But Sam actually seemed to get on with it pretty well almost from the get-go. He'd apparently been an engineer back in the day, and

something about all those old surveillance systems, all tied together, all wrapping into and around each other like some weird nest of cameras… it seemed to really appeal to him. The first week he was there he spent almost the entire time playing with the system and the wiring… left me to do most of the other work on my own. Well, I mean… there were the other guys working there, of course, but even the ones who'd been there awhile started to get the picture and gave Samson a bit of a wide berth after a few days.

He really did seem to get the place in a bit better order. I mean, some of it, only he really understood, but soon enough it actually made sense – what we were watching and when – and he managed to get rid of some of the delay, so that we even managed to catch a couple of shoplifters.

There was only one piece of equipment that seemed to give him any trouble. It was this old Tecton multicamera recorder from the late 80s, managed the feeds for one of the various budget shoe shops that lined the promenade.

It didn't seem all that complicated when you just looked at it, but trying to use it was an absolute nightmare. None the buttons seemed to do exactly what you wanted them to do, and there were all sorts of sequences where pressing a button, holding a button, pressing it three times, all that – they'd all do really different things.

Sam spent almost a whole month wrestling with it, before he finally cracked and he asked Dave – the bearded old guy who we all sort of *assumed* had been there the longest? – whether they still had any of

the old operating manuals.

I remember the smell of dust when Dave went and cracked open the filing cabinet in the back room, before waving his arms in the direction of the drawer and shrugging. I mean, I'd have just left it, obviously, but I think Samson was taking the whole knowing how the system works thing as like – a point of pride? Something he could salvage from the whole situation. Just a way of getting some control over his life, you know?

So he found the manual. More of a pamphlet, really. Can't have been more than ten pages of A5 in the whole thing, yellowed and water-damaged. Well-used, though. Someone had even put their name in the front, like they were afraid people were gonna steal a manky instruction book.

Still, Sam just couldn't put it down. I mean, it was like 10 in the morning when we finally found it, and when I went in at 2:00 to see if he'd taken his lunch break yet, he was still sat there, just staring at it. I mean, I'm not a fast reader, or anything but that's a lot, right?

And like – okay, so this is the part that you're definitely gonna think I'm having a joke with you, but I'm honestly not, I'm dead serious. Because I saw some of the pages over his shoulder, and on one of them there was, there was a picture of me.

Like, a black-and-white photo of my face. I didn't get a good look, but it certainly wasn't one that I remember having taken. Not that

would make it any less weird for it to be printed in an old CCTV manual from back when I was doing nappies. And I'm not making it up, I swear.

Then Samson turned, and he looked at me, and I don't know, I got real spooked. His eyes were all – messed up. Like, weird. And glassy. It was really, really freaky, and I just turned and I got out of there. That wasn't the end of it, though. If it had been then sure, maybe I write it off as a weird dream, where I was tired or whatever, but no. Because from that point, on Samson just gets creepier.

For a start, he's *always* at work. I mean, we're not always on the same shift, so it takes me a while to notice, but when I ask him about it, he just says that our schedules must have synced up weird. But whenever I arrived, there he was, staring at the monitors, watching all the people come and go, his eyes wide like he was drinking it all in. And whenever I was there late, and it was my turn to close up, he'd always say that he was happy to do it, say I could head off a few minutes early.

So, I never actually saw him leave. I tried to stay once, said I needed to do it myself, but he just got real quiet, like… *real quiet,* and stared at me.

The bank of monitors was behind him, and I'm just trying to come up with something to say, get him to talk to me… and one by one, they began to just wink off, turning dark.

And I got this feeling, deep in my gut, that if that last monitor turned off, then something really bad was gonna happen to me. It was one of the old CRT sets, big, and bulky, and the picture on it was never that clear, but for a moment it looked like it was me on there. Staring right back at myself as the screens slowly went black, getting closer and closer. The face on the monitor looked absolutely terrified, and I was starting to feel it myself.

So I just tried to smile, told him not to worry about it, and I headed out as quick as I could. My legs were shaking so hard I almost fell on the way out.

Then there were the actual cameras. I mean, you work in a shopping center, obviously you do a bunch of shopping there. I used to get my lunch, for one, and usually pick up any of the essentials I needed. Sometimes, if I was feeling hard done by and it was payday, I might buy myself a new shirt, or a game, or something.

And obviously, because I work security, I know where all the cameras are. where they cover, even how they move. A lot of them are completely static, just pointing at one place. But gradually, I start to notice something when I'm shopping. It's like a tickling, creeping sensation all over the back of my neck. Like I'm being watched.

So I start to keep an eye on the cameras when I'm in the shops, and you know what, I'm right. They're following me. Whenever I look at them – doesn't matter where it was they were meant to be aimed – they're always focused right on me.

I keep staring at them, moving around, and they just shift to keep the lens pointed at me. But they're not articulated, they don't have any motor or swivel mount they just… move. Pointed right at me.

One time, when no one in the store was looking, I threw a can of deodorant at one of them. Hit it square on. Samson wore sunglasses for the next two days, and when I caught a glimpse of him without them, there was a crack right down the center of his eye.

I tried to talk to the others. I'm pretty sure that they were getting similar weirdness from them. they were all jumpy and nervous those last few months. But I was known as Sam's friend. We'd come in together and everyone just assumed we were close. When I started to ask about it, about what was going on, they just clammed up like I was trying to get them in trouble. My nerves were all shot to hell.

I wasn't in work the week he disappeared. I'd called in with a bullshit stomach thing. I just needed a break, some time to get my head right. It was almost working, you know? A little distance, a little space to relax. I was starting to feel good.

Then I got the call from Dave. He was frantic.

I couldn't make out half of what he was saying over the bad line, but he kept saying Samson's name. Asking me if I "knew," if he'd "told me."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but he kept screaming at me. He kept saying, I must know, he must have told me what was

going on. He kept saying, “what do we do with his eyes?”

I mean, I didn’t know what the hell to say, I just went quiet listening to Dave as he started sobbing down the phone

“He won’t stop,” he said. “We can’t get rid of his face.”

I hung up. And Dave was gone when I went back in. A bunch of them were, all quit suddenly. I wanted to check in with them, find out what happened, but we’d never really been friends, and I didn’t know any of their details.

I never saw Samson again, either. Though, I did find his old work shirt in the back. It was torn to shreds, wrapped around that old instruction manual. I put it back in the filing cabinet, and I threw the shirt away.

I tried to stick around, to do my job, but I was asking too many questions for the folks upstairs, I think. I wanted to know why Samson hadn’t signed out of the building before he disappeared. Why, no matter who tried to reset the system, it always logged back in as him.

Why, whenever I was watching the monitors alone, I’d see him on that old CRT screen. Staring right back at me. Quietly calling for me to join him.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

[exhale] Hm. Better.

Does reading a statement of the Ceaseless Watcher count as a sort of auto-cannibalism, I wonder? Or some sort of bird-like regurgitation of fear? Re-consuming secondhand terror.

Whatever the analogy, I'm finding it harder and harder to ignore the diminishing returns – how much less satisfaction each one gives me. My desire for follow-up, for verification, for… *[frustrated laugh/ sputter]* proper digestion – the experience, it grows less and less.

I honestly don't care if Mr. Maraj was chased down and consumed by his voyeuristic former friend, or if he has forgotten the whole affair, living in blissful ignorance.

I just find my mind already wandering to the next statement, in the hopes that it won't be quite as stale.

End recording.

[CLICK]

MAG149 – Concrete Jungle

Statement #0131305

[CLICK]

MARTIN

Martin Blackwood, assistant to Peter Lukas, Head of the Magnus Institute. Recording statement number 0131305. Statement of Judith O'Neill, given May 13th, 2013.

Statement begins.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

It's weird the things that land you a job sometimes. I mean, a First from Corpus Christi Cambridge, a Master's in biological sciences, you'd think that would be enough to get a decent science job. But as it turns out, the competition these days is legitimately ridiculous and trying to get a position based on my academic record seemed to be a complete waste of time.

Then I applied to the Anglo-Brazilian Amazon Trust, and you know what actually got me the job? I had a half blue in modern pentathlon

and another in orienteering from my undergrad days. Apparently most of the science positions were generally applied to you by the

sort of people who pursued academia specifically to *avoid* ever having to climb up a hill,

and the job required a certain degree of outdoorsmanship. It didn't even matter that I didn't speak Portuguese. Well, not, back then. It was enough that I had the knowledge, fitness, and most importantly, was willing to basically chuck in my entire life in England with no notice to fly off to Brazil for who knows how long. Strange how things work out sometimes, isn't it?

The job title was technically 'ecological specimen technician', but working with the ABAT was basically nothing like any lab tech job I've ever had before. For a start, there wasn't a lab, not really. They built this facility just on the edge of the Caracara ecological station, and from a distance you'd think it was just this big wooden hut, and it kind of was, just full of incredibly high-tech kit. There was basically no testing done on-site though. Aside from the computers, the visiting researchers used to just make whatever notes or observations or run whatever on the models they needed. Basically everything on-site was designed for quick storage and processing any specimens for travel.

Keeping a lab environment up and running in the middle of the Amazon was never really an option, so most of our job was focused on retrieving whatever they wanted testing, and – and making sure that it got to the actual lab intact,

wherever that might have been. I was part of the facility's permanent staff, and we were generally hired out by corporations

or universities who wanted to use our services for some project or piece of research they were conducting. My specific job was to head out into the jungle, usually babysitting some weedy wannabe explorers who insisted on coming along, and then snag whatever they needed to retrieve. Could be environmental measurements, tree cuttings, water samples, and even small animals, though we're not legally allowed to take anything bigger than a frog. It's actually really interesting work, although you do start to get a little bored of the same 50 square miles of jungle after you've been doing it for a few years. And we're very careful to stick to the bits of the jungle we've been assigned, as we're right next to the Yanomami indigenous territory, and accidentally crossing into it ends up being a bit… politically complicated, and even pretty dangerous if you cross paths with the wrong group. The Yanomami can get pretty territorial. I mean, I guess you would be too if you had that many companies trying to illegally strip mine your land? Still, it's not usually a problem. We stay in our area, they stay in theirs.

The worst part is the number of dickhead scientists. You turn up with the same played out Cannibal Holocaust jokes. It's like, sure, technically they practice endocannibalism, but it's just the bone ash of their relatives and loved ones, so you know, calm down, Dr. Livingstone. There's no way they'd respect your sweaty-ass long enough to even consider eating you. Anyway, I'm getting off-topic.

I usually head out with the other specimen tech, Fernanda Mikado, a local.

And by local, I mean she's from Minau, about 200 miles away.

Brazil's pretty big, and if there's one thing she's really good on that I'm not, it's the weather.

I'm pretty hopeless at figuring out what any given day's going to be like, and just have to rely on whatever weather sign I'm currently losing faith in. It doesn't help that the weather in the Amazon is just plain weird, with rains coming out of nowhere, months before the wind should actually be bringing in the clouds, and no one knows why. But Fernanda, she might not know why, but somehow she always knew when, to the point where if she said it might be bad I would just cancel the expedition. No further evidence needed. Not that day though. No, that day we had the world's fussiest climate scientist breathing down our necks, Doctor Nikos Anastos.

I mean, I read his studies and he did good work, sure, but the way he acted you'd have thought that the oceans were gonna drown us all tomorrow if we didn't get out there. And how he talked was like, I mean – Fernanda and I were no strangers to patronizing scientists explaining our jobs back to us, but Dr. Anastos was on a whole other level. He talked to us like we were five-year-olds who just asked him what recycling was. Fernanda was certain it was going to rain, but he "checked online" and apparently it said it was going to be fine. Besides, he had some *real* big money backing him, so we couldn't really push the issue. In the end, we went out into the jungle, and even I could tell that the color of the sky through the canopy was bad news.

Dr. Anastos was looking to measure pollutant and plastic levels in some of the nearby rivers. The various ecological protection laws

should mean that they had virtually none of either, and he was looking into something to do with pollutant transmission and chemical spread from industrial sites. If it hadn't been for the standard NDAs they were always getting us to sign, I could have already told him the sort of results he was going to get; he wasn't the first to come here for this kind of work, but my hands were tied. If you're wondering, by the way, the answer is pretty damn polluted, largely due to various illegal mining and logging operations and a land seizure in the area.

The point is, we were barely an hour into the track when the skies opened. The rain came down thick – thick in that way that I've only ever found in the jungle, where there weren't really droplets, it's – it's more like the air just turns to water. Visibility went down to nothing immediately, and I started to talk quickly to Fernanda about whether we could make it back, or where we might be able to shelter. The rain was bad, but we'd handled worse and we were perfectly calm.

Not so much Doctor Anastos, who was clearly panicking. He shouted at us, yelling over the sounds of the rain-soaked jungle that we had to go back, before immediately charging off in the wrong direction. *(sigh)* Obviously we wanted to leave him to his own stupidity and let the Amazon deal with him, but we both knew that it just wouldn't be worth the paperwork. So we followed him, trying to slow his pace long enough to let him know that he was going the wrong way. But either he couldn't hear us, or, more likely, he wasn't inclined to listen.

Finally, I grabbed his arm, pulling him to a stop. He said something I couldn't make out and pulled back, trying to throw off my grip, but clearly he hadn't considered I'd be the stronger and when my grip held firm he unbalanced himself. He shifted his leg, trying to keep his footing, but slipped on the now muddy-ground, falling and pulling me with him. I instinctively grabbed Fernanda for support but ended up pulling her down as well, the three of us tumbling down a short and muddy decline and landing hard in the foliage.

It took a few moments to pull ourselves together. It wasn't a huge fall, but I felt strangely disorientated as I clambered to my feet, shaking my head in an attempt to dispel some of the fuzziness that had settled over it. The others clearly felt it too, although checking ourselves over, it seemed we'd been lucky. All we had broken was our equipment, although Doctor Anastos had whined about that almost as much as if it had been a bone.

I tried to get my bearings, but even though we'd only moved a few meters laterally at most, I was finding it really hard to get a solid idea on where we were. I couldn't figure out exactly which way we had come, and I couldn't get a clear read on the sun through the canopy and clouds. Fernanda wasn't having any better luck with the compasses, as they were either broken or something magnetic in the area was messing with them. They just gently spun around and around. There was at least *something* resembling a trail, though not one I recognized. Honestly, we should have just waited it out until we were overdue at the facility and they sent out a retrieval team, but that would take almost a full day and I could see in Doctor

Anastos' eyes that there was no way he was going to wait that long. So, we picked a direction and started walking the trail.

When I first saw the structures, my instinct was to turn around and go back. From a distance, they – they looked like shabono, the huge ring of thatch rues the Yanomami place around their settlements for shelter. It didn't make sense though. There was no way we'd gone so wildly off course as to end up in the indigenous territory, absolutely no way. It was something else, something about their construction that seemed off, wrong somehow, so much so that when Fernanda grabbed my arm and urgently whispered that we had to leave, I shrugged her off and headed forward for a better look. That was when I noticed how quiet it was. Aside from the rain the jungle cacophony had simply stopped.

As I got closer to the shabono, it became clear what was wrong with it. Though each roof was thatched like normal, the stands weren't made of leaves, but all kinds of different materials instead. Long strands of plastic, shards of rusted metal, even oddly shaped-hunks of cement. They wrapped through and around each other like any thatch, but the texture, the color – everything about it was different in a way that made my stomach churn, though I wasn't exactly sure why none of the materials were organic or natural.

I shared a look with Fernanda. She didn't say anything but she didn't have to. We both knew how isolationist the Yanomami tended to be, how resistant they were to any outside influences. The idea that they would have the desire to build, or even the equipment to build something like this, was ridiculous. So what did

that leave? Had one of the illegal mining operations done it just to antagonize them? Possible, I guess, but it would have taken a lot of work for basically no reason. It just didn't make sense.

Dr. Anasta didn't know enough about the Yanomami or their buildings to be unsettled, and instead voiced his irritation that we were standing around chatting rather than going for help. He walked around to one of the gaps in the shabono and headed inside. By the time either of us noticed he was already gone. Fernanda and I scrambled after him, desperately hoping that we were good enough communicators to be able to convey apologies to whoever was in there. But the inside was just like the outside, and in the worst possible way.

There were no people in there, but that's not the same thing as it being *empty*. Instead there were… figures. From a distance, they looked like human beings, standing impossibly still, but getting closer quickly revealed the lie. It was just the rough shapes, cobbled together out of a hundred different pieces of garbage: a broken metal clotheshorse for a rib cage, a plastic chair leg for an arm, rusted screws for teeth. In some cases, it looked like someone had gone to a lot of effort to match anatomy with construction. I saw one with a broken water cooler where its stomach would be in. Another had a pair of oxygen tanks standing in for lungs. They were completely still, but there was something about them that made my mouth dry up and my mind scream to run. It didn't feel like they were statues. It felt like they were choosing not to move.

Doctor Anastos didn't seem to have the same unease with the

situation as me and Fernanda, as he examined and prodded the figures with apparent delight. Maybe he thought avant-garde jungle art was just something that happened out there, I don't know. I never got a chance to ask him, because suddenly he was cooing with delight at something he'd picked up off the ground. The ground I could now see was simply a half-inch of loose dirt over the top of a massive plastic tarpaulin. He came over to show us his discovery. It was a chunk of concrete that appeared to be the exact size and shape of a tiny pit viper, even down to the detail on its head. The doctor seemed quite taken with it, but Fernanda immediately sensed something was wrong and stepped back, pulling me with her.

What happened then was almost too quick for me to properly follow. The lifeless concrete viper spun around, opened its mouth, and bit Doctor Anastos on the wrist. He screamed, but only for a second, because after that his throat was full. He started convulsing as gray liquid concrete began to pour from his mouth, from his nose, and his eyes. His limbs went rigid and I could see his body starting to swell with it. I don't know if it was me or Fernanda screaming. Maybe it was both of us. But I know it was her who first spotted that the detritus figures were no longer choosing to stand still.

It was the last I ever saw of Doctor Nikos Anastos. There was never any question of trying to save him. I don't know how long we ran but it was hours before we felt even remotely safe. The jungle looked normal again, and more importantly, it *sounded* normal. We

tried to talk about what we'd seen, but… after confirming we'd both witnessed the same thing, we realized we didn't actually have anything to say about it. Just this white-hot fear that still hasn't completely gone away.

In the end we crossed paths with a group of real Yanomami tribesmen. They were really friendly, and once they figured out we were lost they were very happy to return us to a part of the jungle we knew near our facility. Of course, we didn't have a good explanation for what happened to Doctor Anastos, so we lost our jobs pretty much immediately, but you know what? That's fine. I'm done with the jungle. There's something in there and I don't know which scares me more. The thought that it's more than just the things we left behind? Or that that's *all* it is, and we can't escape the ruins of our own future.

MARTIN

Statement ends.

There's, erm, a note here as well. Looks like Gertrude's handwriting? Start of a letter to Dekker, thanking him for sending Judith through, although it doesn't look like it was ever finished or sent. I assume this is another one he was trying to use to prove the Extinction? It certainly has something in it, mankind's trash giving rise to something terrible. Then again, fear of the other. inanimate humanoid figures, that's all very Stranger isn't it?

(sigh) It's never simple, is it? Sort of surprised Peter hasn't rocked up with some more insights. Haven't seen him around for a while, actually. I mean, (heh) it's not like I miss him, but at least he was someone to – *(realization)* Ah. Yeah, that makes sense. Right, fine. Just me on my lonesome for a while, then.

Could be worse. peaceful at least. I don't miss all the shouting, even if it would – wait.

Excuse me – excuse me, this area is off-limits to the public.

GEORGIE

Sorry?

MARTIN

You can't be here. It's not allowed.

GEORGIE

Oh, sorry, um, Melanie told me to wait for her here.

MARTIN

Oh, you – you're here for Melanie?

GEORGIE

Yeah. *(introducing herself)* Georgie.

MARTIN

I'm sorry – sorry, I didn't realize. I'm – I'm sure she's around here somewhere.

GEORGIE

You must be Martin.

MARTIN

Yeah. Has Melanie been talking about me?

GEORGIE

Oh, um… John used to go on about you a lot.

MARTIN

Oh. Oh, wait – wait, I thought Melanie-Georgie and John-Georgie were…

GEORGIE

Same – same Georgie.

MARTIN

Oh. Ah, so you and John….

GEORGIE

Aren't really talking anymore.

MARTIN

Right.

Why not?

GEORGIE

Excuse me?

MARTIN

Why aren't you talking?

GEORGIE

Because I think he's going to destroy himself, and anyone who lets him get too close. And I don't want that to include me or Melanie.

MARTIN

Maybe he just needs some help.

GEORGIE

I *did* help him, as much as I safely could, but he just carried on anyway.

MARTIN

(overlapping) Yeah, he'll do that.

GEORGIE

I realized if I kept trying it was gonna hurt me more than I was willing to accept.

MARTIN

Well, sometimes the helping people hurts.

GEORGIE

Sure, but that doesn't mean everything painful *helps*.

Sometimes people have problems that will wreck you long before you can make a dent in them,and some people don't want help, they just want other people suffering with them.

MARTIN

John doesn't want that.

GEORGIE

He doesn't know *what* he wants. And from the sound of things he's run out of time to figure it out.

MARTIN

It's easy to pass judgment from the outside.

GEORGIE

One more reason to stay on the outside and watch.

MARTIN

(wry laughter) And- and you think *Melanie's* worth saving?

GEORGIE

It's not about worth. But yeah, she's actually trying to get well, so I'm gonna help her.

MARTIN

This place isn't a sickness –

GEORGIE

No. I think it's worse.

MARTIN

Look, we're all just trying to do the right thing.

GEORGIE

Maybe. Look, life forces you to make hard decisions, but I can never trust someone who goes around *looking* for hard decisions to make.

MARTIN

And what do you mean by that?

GEORGIE

Jumping on a grenade is only heroic if you weren't the one who actually threw it.

MARTIN

That's not what's happening.

GEORGIE

Okay. It's still not something I want any part of.

MARTIN

Well, lucky for you we're fully staffed, so…

[FAINT STATIC BUZZES IN THE BACKGROUND]

MELANIE

Hey, you ready?

GEORGIE

Oh, what? Yeah, whenever you are.

MELANIE

Who were you talking to?

GEORGIE

Oh, it was, um – *(pauses)*

No one, apparently.

MELANIE

(sigh) Yeah, this place will do that to you. Come on.

GEORGIE

Sure.

[FAINT CLUNK, MARTIN SIGHS.]

[CLICK]

MAG150 – Cul-de-Sac

Statement #0140911

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Herman Gorgoli, regarding his period trapped alone in a suburban area of Cheadle. Original statement written 9th November, 2014.

Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Life is hard. I don't wanna bum you out or anything but yeah. You're all alone trying to connect with people, trying to find your place in the world, but in the end the only person you really know is yourself. And even then, not all that well. There's plenty of things I've done I couldn't explain to you. I mean, I'm constantly looking back at my past self and thinking, *what an idiot. How the hell could he have done such an obviously stupid thing? How was I surprised it went so badly?* What a relief I'm now so much older and wiser.

Except that last part never really turns out to be true, does it? The line of when you were your dumb, younger self seems to keep

moving forward with you, until each more mature and reasonable version of you eventually falls foul of it and becomes a young idiot. And when you add in another person you reach a whole other level. You can love them, marry them, dedicate your life to them, that's not the same as actually understanding them.

I was with Alberto for 15 years, and I tell you what, I could always anticipate him. He always used to get annoyed at how predictable I found his mood sometimes, but damned if I ever really knew why. Of course, it doesn't help that when you're that close to someone, everything starts to reflect on each other. One bad mood feeds into another and stress just bounces back and forth between you. You can get real bad if you're not careful, and we weren't careful. The thing is, when we both found ourselves in positions to be working from home, we actually thought it was going to be really good for our relationship. The two of us spending all our time together, we reckoned it was going to be real romantic.

We were real stupid back then, and when Alberto's parents offer to sell us their second home in Cheadle, we thought it was a great investment. Nice and quiet, good neighborhood, just a real nice home for the two of us, and so much bigger than anything we could afford in the city. And – before you think Cheadle, the suburb of Manchester, that's not the one I'm talking about. I'm talking about Cheadle, the suburb of Stoke-on-Trent. Hell, technically it's not even a suburb, it's just a village that looks so much like a suburb that you could pull it up and drop it on the edge of any dull town in England, and it would look the same. Just street after street of

identical, blandly pleasant houses, all winding around each other in dead ends and cul-de-sacs and one-way systems, making sure every house has plenty of inoffensive garden. I've never seen people happily living in a place so obviously dead.

Two years we lived there. Two years imprisoned in that beige, comfortable house with the man I loved, watching our relationship turn to sniping and snapping and bitter passive aggression. I'd say that cheating on him was a foolish act of past me, but honestly it's one of the few decisions I've ever made that I completely understand. I didn't even try to hide it, not really.

When he found out and it all ended, I kind of hated myself for just how relieved I was that I'd finally be able to leave that place. To get in my car and drive away from that gentle suburban nightmare. I mean, I'd lived there for two years and I still got lost trying to leave. I thought that was the worst that place would ever make me feel. I wish I'd been right.

I got a cheap apartment in Liverpool and tried to tell myself I was happier

the single life, footloose and sitting at home, binging bad TV. I tried to get back into the club scene, but honestly I think I'm just too old now. The music was too loud, the drinks were too expensive, and the sort of thing I used to take to, dancing all night now, hit me with a down so hard that I had to write off almost the entire week. It didn't help that over the course of a ten-year relationship, my friends had become our friends, and there weren't any of them

siding with me in this situation. Some would drop platitudes about maybe reconnecting after the fallout was done with, but I know when I'm being handled by people who don't want to create any more drama. It was miserable, but every time I thought about going back, I felt nauseous the idea of returning to those eggshell walls that we never got around to repainting, and the living room that expected me to sit there and watch Midsomer Murders until I passed away peacefully in my sleep. It made me want to throw up.

I'd probably have stayed away forever if it hadn't been for the moose. There was a carved wooden moose you see, something Alberto's grandfather had carved, apparently, and a real family heirloom. It was an ugly old thing, with this weird angular face that always made my skin crawl a bit. I'd never let him display it in our house, so it had lived in one of the suitcases under the stairs. The suitcases I pulled out and filled in a tearful rage when I was leaving, so… yeah, I'd kind of accidentally stolen the moose. When he finally realized and texted me, demanding it back, I should probably just have sent it by post.

But no, for some reason I decided I was going to drive all the way down there and give it back in person. Maybe I was hoping for a fight, or just to see him again, I don't know. I was younger then. Foolish.

It was late when I got to what I thought was his street, driving through the one-way signs and well-maintained gardens that bordered that snaking road. The sun had disappeared but the sky was still fairly light. That late summer twilight that seems to just

drag on forever. There weren't any other cars on the road and I was already getting frustrated. My sat-nav had decided to start sending me around in a circle and I was apparently no closer to finding our… *Alberto's* house. The roads weren't like I remembered them, or rather – they were exactly like I remembered them. Bland, interchangeable, and impossible to navigate.

I must have driven around for almost a half hour before I finally decided that if the internet and GPS couldn't help me, I'd have a proper look at the actual paper map that I kept in the boot. I spent a few minutes scanning the Cheadle area until I found the road I was looking for – Ash Tree Hill. Then I drove on it, I found a street sign at the next turning, hoping to compare it to what was on the map. And then I stopped, because the sign said, "Road". No name, just Road. It wasn't as though the actual name of the street had been defaced or removed, the sign was complete. It just didn't say anything else.

So I drove on until I found the next one. Street. I tried to compare it to the map. Maybe this place just had some really bland road names and somehow I'd never noticed in the two years I'd lived there, but no. The places on the map will have the names I remembered. Chapel Street, Meadow Drive, Station Road. Bland, sure, generic, but not literally placeholder.

I pressed on, looking for more. *Avenue. Close. Way. Lane.* Only ever the suffix, never with a name attached. By this point I was starting to feel a little bit freaked out and I decided to just get out of there. I could come back later, when my sat-nav was working properly in

proper daylight. The sky was getting darker by this point and I had to put my headlights on. I still hadn't seen any other cars on the road, or as I thought more about it, people on the streets. But as you might imagine, getting out of there proved even more difficult than finding the house I was looking for. Every time I thought I'd found a main road that led out of this weird looping suburbia, a one-way sign seemed to spring up, directing me back into the sprawl. I did U-turn after U-turn as I was channeled into one dead-end cul-de-sac after another, until eventually I decided to simply disregard the one-way signs completely.

I cruised past the one that seems to be blocking my most likely exit and almost breathed a sigh of relief as I found myself leaving the suburban maze I'd been trapped in. Until it led me to an entirely different maze of unremarkable residential neighborhoods. Even then, I still didn't accept that I was trapped. It – it didn't make any sense, and it wasn't like I'd seen anything blatantly supernatural, it wasn't that there was anything *ab*normal about the whole situation. It was just that the normal seemed to go on forever.

At some point I got out of the car and started to hammer on random doors. I mean, I tried the doorbells at first, but they were silent, so I started knocking and knocking until my hand hurt. There was no answer at any of them. There were no lights on behind the drawn curtains, and all the house numbers were zero. I got back into my car and started driving again, going on and on until finally I ran out of petrol. It rolled to a sputtering stop at the end of one of the indistinguishable dead ends.

It had been full dark for hours by this point and my dashboard claimed it was 3:00 a.m. My phone had died about an hour ago, and once the last of the power went in the car I was left with no way to tell the time at all. I wished I hadn't thrown away the wristwatch Alberto had given me, but it was too late for those regrets.

I stepped outside, looking down the street. There were no lights on in any of the houses, but the identical lampposts bathed the place a sickly orange as far as I could see. I decided that the roads must be the problem. They were what was keeping me trapped in this place, constantly turning and bending and confusing me. If I just picked a direction and kept to it, eventually I had to get to the edge of what by now I had decided was a newly built neighborhood that apparently no one had moved into yet. As an explanation it didn't make any sense, but it didn't need to, not at that moment.

So I started walking, going around houses and through gardens, trying at all times to keep my direction straight and consistent. I may be too old for clubbing, but I still keep pretty active, so getting over the fences wasn't much of a problem for me as I passed from identical road to identical garden over and over again. I don't know how long I went on like this but it felt like hours. At the start, I was counting how many houses I passed but when I got to a hundred I stopped. It was beginning to eat away at my careful rationalizations and I couldn't have that.

Eventually, my legs started to go and I decided I needed some rest. I was about to sit on the street when a thought occurred. I marched

up to a nearby front door, prepared to kick in the flimsy-looking wood, but trying the handle revealed it was unlocked. I don't know why I picked that house.

It was exactly identical to all the others. I've often wondered if there was anything that drew me to it… perhaps I was just unlucky. Or perhaps there only ever was one house.

The lights worked, which was a relief, and the inside looked exactly how I expected it to. And I mean *exactly* how I expected it to. From the blank IKEA furniture to the subtly patterned cream wallpaper; to the picture frames lining the wall, containing what were clearly stock photos, each of a different family pantomiming a scene of domestic bliss. I headed into the living room and sat down on one of the almost-comfortable armchairs. My body was aching, and my eyes were heavy, and I had the thought that maybe I should head up to the bedroom. In the back of my mind though I knew that was a trap. I had somehow become convinced that if I went to sleep here, then I would never leave.

My hand drifted down and brushed the plastic remote control. Almost on instinct, I picked it up and turned the TV on. A cooking show. A woman I almost recognized fussing over a turkey. She was talking, or at least it sounded like she was, the cadence and the sounds were so much like English that it took me almost a full minute to realize that she wasn't actually saying words.

She never looked at the camera. There seemed to be something wrong with her eyes, though I couldn't say what. Her hands moved

over the pale skin of the turkey, poking it and prodding it as though preparing it, though she wasn't actually doing anything to it. Eventually she gripped a part of it between finger and thumb, and tore off a long strip of dry looking meat, before tossing it over her shoulder and returning to her strange mimicry of cooking.

I pressed the remote again, a shopping channel. The host was a tall, clean-shaven man with close-cropped hair. He was holding a brick and talking about it in that same flow of non-words that still had a familiar salesman's patter. The screen scrolled the message, *BUY NOW!* But there was neither price nor compact details, as this man who wouldn't look at the camera earnestly pretended to sell me a brick. It was almost hypnotic.

I leaned back in the chair trying to think clearly about what was happening

my eyes found themselves focusing on the ceiling, on a small spot of red that seemed to have seeped through from above. As I climbed those stairs I desperately tried to tell myself I didn't know what was going to be up there.

And to be fair I was surprised by some of the details. But as soon as I saw the spot, I just knew that someone else was up there and that they were dead.

The only questions were how and who. I think I'd given up on why.

I didn't know them, as it turned out. A young woman, conservatively dressed. Her face was bloody but I was sure I didn't

recognize her. She had a bag with her, and her ID read “Yotunde Uthman”, not a name I’d ever encountered before. Just another victim of this place. It looked as though she had forced her head through the mirror on the dressing-table. The shards cutting her face and neck to ribbons, a particularly large piece piercing her jugular, spilling blood all down the unremarkable white table and onto the light brown carpet below. I don’t think she’d been dead that long. I’m not a doctor and I didn’t really try to check.

Instead I turned and ran, all my tiredness gone in a sudden rush of adrenaline, down the stairs out the door and into the night and the rows upon rows of bland empty houses. And then all at once I wasn’t running anymore. I was lying on the ground, collapsed, the tarmac rough and cool against my cheek wet from my tears.

I was going to die. I knew that now, just as she had, just as anyone else who came here had. How many corpses lay waiting behind the placid facade of this endless false suburbia?

And that was when I heard it. It was quiet. My mind took a few moments to accept it could be real, but sure enough there it was – the sound of my phone’s ringtone. I looked up, and not three doors down was my car, the door still open where I had left it. I stumbled over my legs, still weak, and grabbed the handset which should have been long out of battery, and I stared at the glowing screen. It was Alberto. He was calling me.

I don’t know how, but the tears came even faster now as I answered, sobbing with relief to hear him yelling at me for taking

so long. Had I forgotten? Was I even planning to bother? I tried to reply to explain but all I could manage to say to get through the shaking sobs was, “I love you.”

He went very quiet and then he hung up.

It didn’t matter though because when I looked around. The windows of the houses were lit and a woman was coming down from her front door to ask if I needed help with my car. We’re working on it, the two of us. We’re not exactly back together yet, but I think it’s going well. He’s reluctant to sell the house but I’ve made it quite clear that I’m never going back to the suburbs, even if I can’t really tell him why.

I checked to see if I could find anything about Yotunde Uthman, and I did find a few old social media profiles, but I wasn’t able to get through to any family or friends. As far as I can tell she disappeared a year ago and nobody noticed.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

The Lonely is possibly the most insidious of the powers, I believe. Certainly it is the one that most delights and having you do its work for it, even the spiders seem to have a hard time matching it for sheer seductiveness. *(hmph)* Time to yourself. Self-care. Putting yourself first. Not being a burden on those you care about. Doesn’t

even need to tell you any lies – just waits for the lies you tell yourself.

We're all well aware that with Peter Lukas in charge of the Institute, it's a very real danger to all of us. We are trying. Daisy, Basira and I, we don't leave the Institute much anymore, so we do spend a lot of time together. It's not that easy though. When everyone has so many walls, so many defenses, sometimes you can feel lonely even when you're all in the same room. But it's better than the alternative and at least none of us are suffering alone. Martin's got it the worst of course, but it still seems to be his choice, and I have to trust that he knows what he's doing.

Still feeling weak. Restless. I want to be proactive but there hasn't – *(sigh)* That hasn't been going quite so well for us lately.

Oh, uh – come in, Melanie.

[DOOR OPENS]

MELANIE

John, have you got a moment?

ARCHIVIST

Of course. I was just having a statement and –

MELANIE

Oh. An old one?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, an old one. I'm not – I'm doing my best.

MELANIE

Sure.

ARCHIVIST

What do you want?

MELANIE

Er, I just wanted to talk to you about… well, um… my career, I guess. My position in the archives.

ARCHIVIST

I see.

MELANIE

Look. *(pause)* I'm not going to do my job anymore.

ARCHIVIST

I am not sure I follow you. We can't quit, we've all tried.

MELANIE

I didn't say I was going to quit, I said I'm not going to do my job.

No researching, no filing, no field trips, nothing that is going to

help the Institute in any way. I'll still be around, I just… I can't be a part of this anymore. If – if I get sick, I get sick, and – and if I die –

ARCHIVIST

Why?

MELANIE

Because this place is *evil*, John. And so doing this job – helping it out, even in small ways – is in some way evil too. Every time we try to use it to do good, it just seems to make everything worse, and – and I will not be a part of that anymore.

ARCHIVIST

What about the Unknowing? We saved the world.

MELANIE

Did we? I mean, I-I *think* it was the right thing to do, but how many people were killed to do it? We weren't even a neutral party. We did it as agents of the Eye, because Elias told us to.

ARCHIVIST

And then you put him in jail.

MELANIE

Martin put him there. And he's still doing harm. You ever think that maybe this whole ritual business is just an excuse, and that we're all

part of some huge, miserable fear machine?

ARCHIVIST

I've… considered the possibility.

MELANIE

Right, well. If I'm just another cog, maybe I can't leave the machine, but from this moment I'm not turning. I'm jammed.

ARCHIVIST

Did your… therapist suggest this?

MELANIE

Not – not exactly. She's just helped me work through some things I've been thinking for a while. Uh, she doesn't know the details, just that I'm in a bad contract situation working somewhere pretty awful. She thinks I work for the Tories.

ARCHIVIST

God.

Melanie, could you – could you describe your therapist for me?

MELANIE

(laughing) What, you think I wouldn't notice if she had cobwebs down her face?

ARCHIVIST

…no.

MELANIE

(long sigh) That's it, isn't it? Do you really think I'm so stupid I wouldn't have noticed if my therapist was some kind of monster?

ARCHIVIST

I just – it was a worry.

MELANIE

Right, right. Okay. I know… *that* is why I ruined my first four sessions and almost torpedoed the chance at a genuinely really good therapist, because I was so paranoid that she was going to turn out to be some – some *thing* trying to manipulate me. But no, she's not full of spiders, or made of wax, or wearing the therapist's skin or whatever, she's just a well-trained professional who I am paying to help me.

ARCHIVIST

Okay. *(sigh)* It's just… the Web can be subtle, you understand?

MELANIE

And? For all you know its plan is to paralyze you with indecision. Leaving you sitting here, terrified that everything you do is somehow all part of its grand plan. And who do you think that fear

is gonna feed?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, well. You are not the first to make that point.

MELANIE

Look, I… didn't come here for a fight. I just wanted to let you know what was going on. If you need me, I'll be trying to get Daisy drunk.

ARCHIVIST

Good luck. It's only ever happened once in 2006, she drank – sorry. Didn't mean to.

MELANIE

Sure. See you around.

[CLICK]

MAG151 – Big Picture

Statement #0181408

[CLICK]

[FAINT SOUNDS OF FOOTSTEPS APPROACHING OVER A TICKING CLOCK]

UNKNOWN

Oh! Hello.

Hmmm…

[CHAIR SCRAPING, PAPER SHUFFLING]

Mm-hm! *[laugh]*

[MORE PAPER SHUFFLING, CLANKING/BANGING, LIKE A LARGE OBJECT BEING SHIFTED OR A DOOR OPENING]

[laugh]

[SOUND OF SMALLER OBJECTS BEING SHIFTED AROUND]

MARTIN

Um, excuse me sir – uh, sorry, you – can't actually be here?

UNKNOWN

Oh, not to worry! I seem to be doing all right so far.

MARTIN

No, I, I mean – this area is actually off limits to the public, so –

UNKNOWN

And quite right, too! Goodness, the things they could learn here! Turn your hair white, eh? *(chuckles)* Best to keep them out, I say.

[THE UNKNOWN MAN CONTINUES TURNING PAGES, 'HMM'ING TO HIMSELF.]

MARTIN

(suspicious) …who are you? Did *Peter* send you?

UNKNOWN

Ah! You must be *Martin.* Goodness, he was not exaggerating.

MARTIN

What's that supposed to mean?

UNKNOWN

Oh, come now, don't be like that.

Let's start over. Simon. Simon Fairchild. Peter asked me to look in on you and have a small chat. Well, a big chat, really. Answer all those… nagging questions.

MARTIN

Simon Fairchild.

…*(nervous laugh)* Wait, Simon Fairchild, as in –

SIMON

As in, all those people who said I did horrible things to them and their loved ones? Yes!

…They *have* been in, haven't they? I'd hate to think I'm underrepresented in here – not when Peter tells me that that *(derisive) bone* fellow has at least half a dozen –

MARTIN

No, no! *(nervous laugh)* Not, not at all. You, you've sent *plenty* of people our way.

SIMON

Brilliant! So. Shall we get started?

MARTIN

S-sorry, *(nervous laugh)* I'm still not *entirely* clear what's going on. What *are* you doing here?

SIMON

I see! I suppose it was a bit much to expect him to have filled you in on everything already. I mean – in many ways – that's the point.

MARTIN

(resigned) …riiight.

SIMON

So. You've been working with Peter for a while now, correct?

MARTIN

Sure.

SIMON

And he's been promising you answers to all those – difficult questions?

MARTIN

I, I mean, sort of.

SIMON

Well, that's me.

MARTIN

What?

SIMON

Yes, well, you have to understand how it is with Peter. He finds talking to people *directly* very difficult. Especially explaining the more, um – *esoteric* side of things? Charming chap, I'm sure you agree – *absolutely lovely* – but even if you *can* convince him to *actually* give you a straight answer, he's just not that good at actually putting these things into words.

Something to do with his upbringing, I think. *(conspiratorial whisper)* I'm pretty sure he was home-schooled, you know!

MARTIN

So – so, what, he sends you to answer questions because he doesn't want to?

SIMON

Precisely!

MARTIN

And you *do* it? *Why?*

SIMON

Is that your first question?

MARTIN

(tense) …is there a limit?

SIMON

Only until I get bored. And that does tend to come more quickly these days.

MARTIN

O…okay, okay then, sure, sure. First question, then. Why are you helping Peter? Don't you serve different, you know, fears?

SIMON

Well, now… See, that's actually *two* questions. The answer to the first is simple. I lost a bet, and this is how the good Captain chooses to use that.

The second is… sort of? I mean – yes, if you want to get technical, he serves the One Alone and I serve the Falling Titan, but those two are a lot closer than you might imagine.

After all, the larger the space you find yourself alone in, the more isolated you feel.

MARTIN

And being aware of how lonely you are *(dry laugh)* can make anywhere feel more empty.

SIMON

Exactly.

I've actually been toying with the idea of trying to do something with the scale of humanity itself – you know, emphasize all that overpopulation nonsense – but honestly, it just doesn't ring true for me. We're all just so tiny and pointless, you see, it's hard to really get past it.

Also, I worry it might be straying into territory that emboldens our potential new rival.

MARTIN

The Extinction.

SIMON

The very same. Peter said you'd have a lot of questions about that one.

MARTIN

I do.

How are new powers born?

SIMON

Hmm… Don't know.

MARTIN

How soon could it attempt this ritual?

SIMON

(cheerily) No clue.

MARTIN

How do we stop it?

SIMON

Can't help you.

MARTIN

(teeth gritted) Could you at least *try?*

SIMON

No, no, no, you're right, of course. The thing you have to remember is that no one actually knows how these things work – not *really*.

There's always been plenty of theories, of course, and over a century or two you do start to get an intuitive feel for it, but… there's really no hard-and-fast *rules*.

The powers, or entities, or fears, or whatever you want to call them, are bound up in emotion. In feeling. How they exist, what they can do, how they interact with the world… it all makes about as much logical sense as a nightmare.

[MARTIN INHALES]

Which is to say, there is a certain sort of emotional logic to it all: things *feel* like they flow together in a way that makes sense, but if

you try to stop and do the maths, then it all comes apart. At least, in my experience.

When is a new power born? Well, when does it *feel* like its birth would be right? When enough creatures suffer a terror of it that *feels* distinct, that *feels* truly its own? Then it would probably feel right for it to emerge into its own.

Or perhaps there's a ritual. If it *feels* right to enact some sort of birthing ceremony, some… apocalyptic midwifery –

MARTIN

(interrupting) And *how close is it,* do you think?

SIMON

Hard to be sure. Peter thinks very close indeed, what with all the current hubbub, and I'm inclined to agree.

MARTIN

You don't sound worried.

SIMON

That's because we disagree on exactly how bad it will be. Peter seems convinced that the Extinction is different, that its actual birth will be as bad – or worse – as another power fully manifesting. He believes its advent will be heralded by all sorts of disasters, and catastrophes, and global upheavals, and whatnot. That kind of thing.

MARTIN

Sounds like a rich feeding ground.

SIMON

Well, exactly! Peter, however, seems to think that it will upset the balance that we all have an awful lot invested in. And he's not at all certain the world as we understand will come out the other side.

MARTIN

And let me guess: you think he can't see *the big picture.*

SIMON

(exhale) I see why he likes you.

[MARTIN SIGHS]

It's all a matter of perspective, you see. My patron has gifted me with, quite frankly, an absurdly long life. An appropriate gift, and one that serves to provide a certain distance from things. Of course, a paltry few centuries is nothing, really, but it's more than most get. And even in that brief time, I've seen all sorts of ebbs and flows to the balance of things.

Do you know when the last ritual I attempted was?

MARTIN

– I – I don't know, that space station…?

SIMON

Oh, goodness, no, that's the future, my boy! No. It was 1853! The height of the aquarium mania! All over the empire, people were starting to understand the depths of the terrible unknown below the ocean. And I thought that was a rich vein to be tapped. Even bothered old Halley[1] into helping me design a special diving bell for the ritual. I called it the Awful Deep, and between you and me, I was rather proud of myself.

MARTIN

So why didn't it work?

SIMON

Because it wasn't a very good idea…? The fear wasn't out there – not like I hoped it was. It all sort of… fizzled.

Also, a Hunter broke in and destroyed the mechanism. Sent me and all my sacrifices plummeting to the bottom of the ocean.

MARTIN

I don't see your point.

SIMON

(inhale) My point is…

…you know, I've quite forgotten!

[MARTIN SIGHS IN FRUSTRATION]

SIMON

Hey, I've just not been doing much recently. It's not a good time for perspective, you see. The world all feels too small these days.

I used to do a lot with religion, but it's just not got the same conceptual scope as it used to. Honestly, I'm pinning most of my long-term hopes on space. But that's at least a hundred years away.

MARTIN

(tense) Assuming the Extinction doesn't derail everything…!

SIMON

Which is why I'm happy helping Peter.

But, if it does, then I'll either be dead, which will be fine, or… I'll adjust.

MARTIN

It doesn't *scare* you…?

SIMON

Martin. Taken on a cosmic scale, we've never even been alive – not in any way that might register. I mean, if this dreadful little planet had a fractionally different orbit, and life had never even started here, then ultimately nothing of any real importance would have

changed.

MARTIN

…

I think our experience of the universe has value. Even if it disappears forever.

SIMON

What a lonely way to look at things. Which makes sense, I suppose.

MARTIN

So what do you *do,* then, if – if the world is pointless, and your god is so weak right now?

SIMON

I have a good time. And do my best to avoid the drama.

It's all been getting a bit much over the last few decades. I blame the number of people. From a raw numbers point of view, it's getting very busy. More minds equals more fear, after all.

MARTIN

(pouncing) I thought *you* said that the maths doesn't work.

SIMON

Oh, you *are* a quick one!

So, maybe I'm wrong! But, crucially, I suspect a lot of the other servants and creatures out there have a similar idea. Probably why they're all in such a rush to make their own attempts.

MARTIN

You make it sound like the – the entities don't even know what they're doing.

SIMON

I have no idea if they're "doing" anything at all. If they're even capable of "doing" things. I know that most of their servants are simply doing their best to interpret and serve something that is almost definitively inconceivable.

MARTIN

You can't be *serious!*

SIMON

All right. Let's try one of those analogies Peter finds so annoying. Erm… imagine you are deaf. But every night you hear the most beautiful music in your dreams, and your every waking thought is consumed by trying to reproduce that music. – oh, you're mute, as well, in this analogy, or at least, you can't sing. And you need to invent the idea of a musical instrument from scratch. Everyone else is also deaf and mute, and, um –

MARTIN

(impatient) Yes, yes, I think I get it.

SIMON

Yes, well the point is: most of us are trying so desperately to recreate our own dream symphony that we bring an awful lot of our own baggage into the mix.

MARTIN

…What about the monsters?

SIMON

What monsters?

MARTIN

Things like Mi– erm, uh, the Distortion. I thought they were part of the entities themselves – like, extensions. Surely *they* know what's going on.

SIMON

Honestly, I think they have it a lot worse than we do. Imagine being a hand that can conceive of itself – having impulses shot through you, being moved and clinched by some unseen mind – but never knowing the reasoning behind your own actions. Or even if you're just some thoughtless reflex. *(noise of disgust)* Sounds horrid.

MARTIN

(agitated) So – so, if no one's ever actually communicated with their patron, how do you know they even want rituals? How – h-how does anyone know if they could ever even work?

SIMON

We don't!

[MARTIN SCOFFS]

SIMON

And honestly? The idea that this is all some grand cosmic joke – thousands of us running around spreading horror and sabotaging each other pointlessly, while these impossible, unknowable things just lurk out there, feeding off the misery we cause?

I find that interpretation *quite appealing.*

But, I still hear the music in my dreams.

[MARTIN MAKES A SOUND OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT. SEVERAL MOMENTS OF SILENCE PASS.]

MARTIN

Who are you? No, no – who *were* you?

SIMON

Originally? No one you would have heard of. No great historical

figure or atrocity-monger.

I've been Simon Fairchild about, um, eighty or ninety years, maybe? For business purposes, mainly. By which I mean I was bored at not being wealthy, so I made some arrangements and sent Mr. Fairchild on a very long fall. I could go into details, but without a certain amount of knowledge of 1930s tax practices, it wouldn't mean very much to you.

MARTIN

And – and how did you get started with it all? Did you – did – did you just look up at the sky one day and fall head-over-heels in love?

SIMON

Sort of, actually.

Except it wasn't the actual sky, it was a painting. I was apprenticed, you see, under Tintoretto. Dreadful man, but a decent artist. He was fascinated, you see, with the human figure. He found most of the rest of the work dreadfully dull, so he'd always delegate a lot of it to us.

He had a particular distaste for painting the sky, and I was always the one he called on to do them. Days, weeks I would spend, focusing so intently on these patches of clear sky or swirling cloud at the top of his latest self-proclaimed masterpiece. And gradually it sort of, um, drew me in, until it seemed to dwarf the rest of the work. Every stroke of the brush felt larger than my entire existence.

And when I finally lost my footing, well…

I should, of course, have fallen to the floor of the church, broken my neck. But that blue-painted sky welcomed me with open arms. And I never looked back.

I try to share it with others – not just as sacrifices – but they often find it difficult to keep up with the, um… *velocity* I tend to live at. They tend to get left behind, and I suppose it doesn't help that I can't bring myself to see any of them as anything other than trivial.

MARTIN

Mm.

SIMON

No wonder I'm so sympathetic to the Lonely!

You know, this really is a place for self-discovery, isn't it? *(chuckles)* Statement ends, I suppose.

MARTIN

Er – I'm sorry?

SIMON

Oh, nothing, just my own hubris.

I should have known. When I came here, I said to myself, "Simon," I said, "You're going to answer this young man's questions, but

you're not going to give the Watcher a statement. You're better than that." But it's a hard one to resist, isn't it? You get in the flow of talking about yourself, and it all just… tumbles out!

MARTIN

It does seem like it.

SIMON

(laughs) Well, this *has* been fun. Now, if we're about done –

[CHAIR SCRAPES]

MARTIN

We're *not.*

Sit back down.

SIMON

Bold! (chuckles)

[CHAIR SCRAPES]

I like it.

MARTIN

You said you were here to answer my questions for Peter, but so far you've told me basically *nothing* of any use.

SIMON

The big answers are rarely helpful.

MARTIN

Then let's try some smaller ones.

Is Peter attempting a ritual?

SIMON

Not in the sense that you're used to. Him and his family made their play a few years ago, and they failed. I'm sure he'd like me to explain it, but I think he can do that one himself.

MARTIN

How honest has he been with me?

SIMON

About which part?

MARTIN

Protecting the others.

SIMON

I think he tried. I suspect he may have slightly exaggerated his abilities when you first made the deal, but he certainly expended a reasonable amount of influence and resources to follow through.

MARTIN

But – but that was never the endgame, was it? He just wanted me on his side long enough to rope me into his, his plans for the Extinction.

SIMON

Do you really need me to answer that one?

MARTIN

Fine. So, why *me?* What's his plan? Why not get the others involved?

SIMON

He is what he is, Martin. For a creature of the Lonely, the urge is always to isolate, never to communicate or connect.

I suspect that's why he's so keen on wagers. It allows him a framework for cooperation that doesn't risk any sort of intimacy.

As for his plan… I don't know the details! But I believe there is something in the Institute that he thinks can help his cause.

MARTIN

And he needs me to use it…?

SIMON

Presumably. From what he said, it must be powerfully aligned to

the Watcher. If he wishes to use it, it would need someone already touched by the Eye. And if he wants to *control* that someone –

MARTIN

They need to serve the Lonely.

SIMON

Quite right.

[MARTIN EXHALES]

Anything else?

MARTIN

How do *you* feel about this?

SIMON

You might need to be a *tad* more specific.

MARTIN

All of it. Peter's plan, the Extinction, me…?

SIMON

I think…*(inhale)* I think Peter is taking a rather large but calculated gamble. Not just on you, but on a lot of things. If it works, he'll be in a very strong position. And if he fails, it won't be all that bad.

MARTIN

(tense) You don't think it'll be the end of the world?

SIMON

Oh, it very well *might* be, but… *(sigh)* life has continued through dozens of apocalypses already. Ice ages, pandemics, calamities, extinctions. The only reason this one feels special is because, well – it's happening to you. And that's the sort of solipsism that tends to come with loneliness, in my experience.

So, my feeling is that I'll help out where I can, but ultimately, if this Armageddon comes off, then – so be it. Either billions suffer and life goes on, or billions suffer and life doesn't. In the grand scheme of things, it's all much of a muchness.

MARTIN

…Right.

SIMON

Sorry. *Too* big-picture? I get that a lot.

MARTIN

No, it's… *(inhale)* Thank you. This has… actually been quite helpful.

SIMON

I'd say, "any time," but honestly, if you see me again… I may just throw you off something for a joke.

How do you feel about – roller coasters?

MARTIN

Um… Neutral.

SIMON

(disappointed) Oh. You're no fun.

[FOOTSTEPS WALK AWAY]

[MARTIN SIGHS]

BASIRA

Who was that?

MARTIN

Basira, please, I *don't* have time –

BASIRA

(interrupting) Oh, no, you don't.

MARTIN

(warning) Basira, *let go.*

BASIRA

I don't think so. Three weeks I've been waiting to catch sight of you, and now I find you chatting with Simon Fairchild. No, you're not pulling your little vanishing act on me.

MARTIN

How did you know about –

BASIRA

Yeah, John's not the only one who listens to statements.

MARTIN

…

It's none of your business.

BASIRA

No? Because it seems to me like you're palling around with two very dangerous people, right around the time you're cutting all of us out.

[MARTIN INHALES]

That makes me worried. It makes me *suspicious*.

…

Tell me I'm wrong.

MARTIN

You're wrong.

BASIRA

So what's going on, then?

Talk to me.

MARTIN

It's. *Complicated.*

BASIRA

What, they're just here out of the goodness of their hearts? Helping you save the world from Extinction?

MARTIN

You know about that?

BASIRA

Yeah, John found the tapes you made for him –

MARTIN

(frantically) Shh, shh!

BASIRA

Found a stash of them a while ago. I made sure he shared with the club –

MARTIN

(frustrated) Well, there you go, then!

BASIRA

John may be going through a whole “we have to trust Martin” thing, but I’m not. As far as I can see, you’re either compromised, or you’re being played. And I want to know which.

MARTIN

I didn’t know John had listened to them already.

BASIRA

Well, he has. *He* seems to think you’ll come to him when you need him. *I* think you’re feeding him what he needs to hear, so he doesn’t bother you.

MARTIN

Look, I don’t have time for this. I don’t *like* that I have to work with Peter any more than you do, and I didn’t *know* that Simon was involved until today.

But I would *hope* that you and John understood the importance of preventing an apocalypse.

BASIRA

…I guess I'm just a bit burned out on the end of the world.

MARTIN

Yeah, well, that's *your* problem.

BASIRA

And if you really think this whole Extinction thing is it – why not come to us for help?

MARTIN

I can't. Peter's the one with the plan, and… it needs me to be alone.

BASIRA

And you don't see anything suspicious about that –

MARTIN

(overlapping) Of *course* I do, but it – might be the only way, and… so far at least he's been honest with me. Awful, but… honest.

I need to do this.

For everyone.

[LONG PAUSE]

BASIRA

You're not expecting to come out of this, are you?

MARTIN

I'll do what I have to. If I'm right, no one else needs to get hurt.

BASIRA

…

(sigh) Okay.

[MARTIN EXHALES]

You want to do whatever grand sacrifice you think is going to save everyone, go ahead. But you'd best be sure you're not just playing their game.

MARTIN

I know what I'm doing.

BASIRA

We'll see.

Don't make me regret this.

MARTIN

Yeah.

Don't… tell John.

Please.

BASIRA

Fine. I can't promise you he won't just Know it, though.

MARTIN

…

How is he?

BASIRA

Hungry.

[MARTIN EXHALES]

But… he's keeping it together.

MARTIN

(exhales) That's good.

Can I go now?

BASIRA

Sure.

[MARTIN SIGHS]

[CLICK]

1. Edmond Halley again? ↩

MAG152 – A Gravedigger's Envy

Statement #8370108

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S OFFICE]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Hezekiah Wakely, regarding his career as a gravedigger. Compiled from a series of letters to Nathaniel Beale between 1837 and 1839. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

August, 1837

I'll thank you again for your endeavors on my behalf, Nathaniel. I'm sure you can always rely on having a true friend in me. I've been installed here some weeks now, and I'm finding myself well-contented, my sexton duties keeping my time employed such as I scarce have a chance to allow myself those dark thoughts that so concerned you when last we visited.

It's a fine little church, and the Reverend is a good sort, though I'll confess to finding his gospel readings tending towards the dull of a Sunday service. Not his fault, of course. The Lord gave him that voice for a purpose, no doubt – but sometimes that purpose does feel like it might be providing me a few minutes of unearned slumber. Still, his conduct towards me has never been less than compassion itself. Why, he told me not yesterday that he'd never seen the church shine like it had since I've taken over its maintenance.

"Shine?" I says. "Sir, that's a rare compliment when it comes to cleaning sandstone." And he laughed heartily, though the joke was of no great consequence. So you may rest easy knowing I am happy enough.

My troubled sleep, on the other hand, has not, of yet, resolved itself in any way to my satisfaction. I work myself to exhaustion, cleaning, polishing and looking after the church proper, and I tell you, when I lie abed I can scarce rise again for the weakness I leave myself in. And yet, sleep still eludes me. And when it does not, I wake as though my heart were trying to leap from my chest, and my throat were full of dust and ashes.

You need not despair, Nathaniel, I know the bottle will no longer help, and my other labors keep the nights from bothering me as once they did, but I do find myself longing for a true and proper sleep.

(pause) I tell a lie. There *are* some nights I find myself easily

slipping to dreamless respite, though you'll think me a morbid soul for it. Those days I spent digging graves in the churchyard – on *those* nights I sleep, if you'll forgive the joke, the sleep of the dead.

I've never quite known a rest like it. Perhaps it is the harder, more physical aspect of the task, or perhaps the quiet rhythm of it. There's no echo as there is in the church, just the sound of pick and shovel hitting dirt. And when it's deep enough, when you stand at the bottom, the noise of the world just… fades away to nothing. It is the sort of quiet that makes you feel as though the commotion and hubbub of life were but a terrible dream, and in sleeping you were waking up to peace.

(heh) You'll laugh, Nathaniel, but I almost wrote that I hope I have a chance to dig *more* graves. What a thought. No, I'd not wish that, for to dig graves one must have something to fill them, and the good Lord takes that at His own pace. You may satisfy yourself I am content with the position you have found for me, and spare no concern for my well-being or the receipt of your charity.

Your humble servant,

Hezekiah Wakely

February, 1838

Nathaniel, something has happened to me. And I felt it only right to send a letter and let you know of it, being as your last letter

expressed such a kind curiosity towards my sleeplessness, and – what I mentioned to you in my earlier letters.

My nights have indeed been easier of late, something I may partially ascribe to the recent outbreak of fever in the town – taking more of my time for the grim business of grave digging – and the rest to my gradual settling into my position as sexton.

There is such peace in the churchyard, you see: to walk atop the soil knowing that, deep below my feet, those blessed souls wait happy and silent in the cool, damp earth, counting the days until the Resurrection. It gives me such warmth to think of that I have taken to spending much of my unoccupied time wandering the graves, and, where the mood allows me, taking my sleep there.

I hope such talk does not upset you, and you may rest assured I am no suicide. It is simply the serenity of the dead I envy, not their lifelessness. I seek no escape from the hardships of life, for since you gave me this position I can call little of my life any true hardship, and I am as free of suffering as I have ever been.

But I do long for that rest. I tell myself I wake each day renewed, but I am never as truly satisfied as when I'm in my slumber, and insensible to the world. Perhaps that's what I hoped to find in my drinking, that gentle oblivion, but it seems like a world ago. I know what it truly is now, walking the churchyard – though you may rest assured I shall wait my turn like a dutiful servant until our Lord sees fit to call me.

I do find, however, that when I dig my graves, I have been going deeper. And at times, I worry I might dig so far as I can no longer get out with my meager ladder. Now, those moments – you must not cast judgment on me for this, Nathaniel, for it is simply a passing fancy – but I will often lie myself down on that soft earth, and I will sleep. And I swear to you that the sleep I find there is more blissful than any I have ever found.

It was there, not a week ago, that it happened. I was digging a grave for the squire's father – a cruel and venal man, who I rather doubt has easy found himself in the kingdom of Heaven, but a pure soul is not what buys you a well-appointed cemetery plot, and he had plenty of money to do exactly that. I saw his body, you know, as it was being prepared, and I tell you truly that for all the wickedness that man had done, his body knew gentle repose. Though not as gentle, perhaps, as it might be with six feet of earth atop it.

So that was my task, and sure enough, I went about it with my usual fervent duty, such that the work of the day was done by the time the sun were at its height. It was cold that day, and bitter windy, and cracking the ground had been as hard as ice. At least until a few feet down. But by the end of it… oh, I tell you there was warmth in that grave. Whether by my own body or the heat of the soil, I couldn't say, but it was as comfortable as the fireplace of a public house, and the wind could not reach me in the hole that I had made.

So, as is my late habit, I lay down. And I had no sooner done this

than a powerful sleep overtook me.

I had a dream, then. I dreamt a rain had come. A terrible bitter rain that chilled my bones and turned the soil around me dark and sodden. The walls grew damp and slippery, their firm shape lost as they began to slip and crumble. And then all at once they collapsed, the grave filling in a moment with a wave of mud and wet dirt. In a single terrible moment of utter terror, it was atop and around me, covering my face and filling my lungs with its awful choking sod.

And the strangest thing was that it was wonderful. I had never felt such safety as within the crushing weight of earth all around me, the pressing embrace of the buried. In that instant I knew what it was to be dead, and I ached with envy for them.

When I awoke I was above ground again, amid the graves. The rain had been no dream, and I was cold and soaked through, wracked with a chill you may well discern from the quality of my hand. It was true, also, that the rain had caused the grave to collapse, though I must have left it shortly before that happened. I was in no state to address the issue, however, and in fact the Reverend had to ask the sexton from St. Mark's to do so, as I am still laid up in bed with this cough. *(heh)* Perhaps I shall be joining the churchyard sooner than I dared hope.

Write me back soon, for I have precious little to do in this invalid's bed, and sleep is far from me once again.

Your humble servant,

Hezekiah

June, 1838

I must first thank you for your visit, Nathaniel, although my recovery were well completed, it is always most heartening to see an old friend. I hope that the business that drew your way so abruptly were well completed, and that I may anticipate your company again after not too long.

I must tell you I've been in some distress these last few weeks, due in no small part of the agitation of the Reverend, who has, of late, succumbed to a very specific, though understandable, mania.

The circumstances and causes are easy enough to explain. It was the funeral of young Nellie Cooper that did it, which was a most upsetting affair. I'll say I have much sympathy with his plight, as I had a chance to view the body myself, and if you'd asked me if I concurred with Doctor Grant's judgments of death by drowning, I would have agreed without hesitation. She had that peace to her that I've spoken of to you before, and I knew how happy she must be to soon be returning to the earth.

But that day, as they carried the slim coffin down towards the hole that I had dug, and so recently enjoyed my own calm repose, there was a commotion among the pallbearers. Little Nellie's coffin began shaking and rocking back and forth, such as they were unable to keep their footing and dropped it. The crash of the wooden casket

hitting the earth is a sound I'll not forget in a hurry, nor the shriek that came from inside the splintered wood as it burst open.

As you may well have surmised, Nellie was not, after all, dead, and had shaken off the stupor mere minutes before she was due to be placed below ground. She's unharmed, at least in body, though I can scarce imagine the maddening strain must have put on her to see her own tombstone carved and waiting above the dark silence of her open grave.

To be honest, I suspect the worst effect is upon the Reverend. To be so near responsible for burying a person alive has shaken him deep, and he stopped all funeral services for a time.

To my mind there are far worse fates. But he has in his head an idea to begin fitting the graves I dig with these new "safety bells" that he has heard of, so that any as might be alive below ground might signal us above for rescue.

I dread the idea. If it had been me in that coffin, destined for the peace below ground, I can think of little that I would hate more than the jarring, clanging of a bell pulling me from my rest.

My dreams have been strange, of late.

Yours,

Hezekiah

December, 1838

I've been thinking, Nathaniel, of funerals and bodies. Souls that escape leaving this common clay to become one again with a truer clay. Were we not created from mud? And it seems more fitting to me that we should return forever to that mud, not pulled from it by some would-be Redeemer, or lifted to sing hosannas in his holy court.

I've worked so long, so hard. Do I not deserve a rest in the mud from which I came? Commit my body to the earth and let it *stay* there. I'd do the same for you. For worship of the Most High – though it may be earned, *perhaps,* by He that made the heavens and the earth – well, to my mind, all that prayer still sounds a lot like *work.*

Do you know what the Reverend said in his sermon the other day? He said that in the Kingdom to come there will be no need of sleep – that we shall never need to miss a moment of that bliss. But sleeping in the cool, soft dirt is all the bliss I could ever ask for.

I suppose the Lord would have no call to think such things a blessing. He was never buried, was he? Not *truly.* Laying in a cave for three days, a rock pushed across the entrance before being taken up bodily – no, He was never *buried.*

And *He* always had more work to do – harrowing hell and redeeming the sins of mankind. No, He had no rest, and never asked for it, save a moment of doubt at Gethsemane. But He is the son of

God and we are merely sons of the dirt. We are not as strong as He is, and we deserve rest. We deserve to *sleep*.

I've been trying to sleep, but that bell kept ringing, the one over Jacob the baker's grave. That nonsense safety valve the Reverend insisted on putting there, ringing and ringing, and disturbing the sleep of everyone in the churchyard. I've no doubt it disturbed Jacob as well, who worked so hard all his life and never thought to complain of his lot.

He deserved to rest. So I cut the cord. And now he is quiet.

I can't get my clothes clean anymore. And my shovel is never far from my hand.

Yours,

Hezekiah

January, 1839

I am disappointed, Nathaniel, I'll not deny it. More than that, I am hurt. My letters to you have always been a comfort to my soul, a place where I may lay my heart bare and tell the truths of what I think and feel without fear of judgment or reproach. That you chose to share what last I wrote you with the magistrates has wounded me sore.

They came and asked their questions, as I'm sure you hoped they

would, but could of course prove nothing. Jacob is long dead, and I was very careful how I stopped the bell.

But such suspicions eat away at peace, and of course the Reverend dismissed me.

I've lost my churchyard, Nathaniel, and I wonder if I shall ever sleep again.

It was my own fault, of course – I should never have told you these things assuming you would understand. But how could you? *You've* never felt the close embrace of peaceful soil. *You've* never truly slept in the bosom of the earth. These things are not such as can be shared in words, and it was my foolishness to think that they could.

But worry not, Nathaniel. The love I bear you will not let me leave you ignorant. As I did with the Reverend, I will come and I will *show* you, once and forever, the true and glorious peace of the Buried.

Your most humble servant,

Hezekiah Wakeley

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Nathaniel Beale is buried on the grounds of St. Peter's Church in his

hometown of Dunstable. And I am only the third person to know that in almost 200 years, after Nathaniel Beale himself, and Mr. Wakeley, the person who buried him.

I cannot tell how much of the change that comes over someone when they are taken by one of the Fears is a direct product of their influence, and how much is their own mind, desperately contorting itself to accept and justify the awful things they find themselves drawn to doing.

I have read many statements now by those who are changing, who are becoming – something else, and few if any of them seem… entirely rational. Entirely the people that they were before.

But how can I tell, I suppose. My job is to view people at their lowest, their most fearful and unstable moments. Perhaps there is less change there than I imagine. Certainly, *I* don't *feel* different. I have no desire for pseudo-religious philosophizing, or *delighting* in the suffering of those I harm.

Then again, I suppose I'm hardly in the best position to judge. Perhaps to anyone listening to these tapes I sound remarkably similar to Hezekiah. Or to Manuela. Or to Jane.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[THERE IS A GENTLE DRIPPING SOUND. A DOOR OPENS, CREAKING LOUDLY, ONTO THE SOUND OF THE DISTORTION'S STATIC.]

HELEN

Hello, John. Been a while since you've been down here.

ARCHIVIST

(impatient noise) I didn't come here to see *you*.

HELEN

Oh, come now! I'm sure I'm more interesting company than the late Jane Prentiss.

ARCHIVIST

It's all that's left of her now – apart from a jar of ashes in my desk. Just a circle of rotten stone on an otherwise-unremarkable wall.

HELEN

More of a legacy than some people get.

ARCHIVIST

There was going to be a gate, I think. A hole that she rotted into the Corruption itself. Maybe the start of a ritual?

HELEN

Hmm. Not exactly *impressive*, is it?

ARCHIVIST

Less complex, certainly… But I think that's the thing about – what did Elias call it? – Filth. I don't think it really plans much. It just starts to grow wherever it can get a foothold, and, if no one stamps it out in time… game over.

HELEN

How… *clumsy. (heh)*

(condescendingly – like a haughty funeral guest realizing they shouldn't mock the deceased's déclassé tastes in front of the mourners) Though, I *suppose* it has a certain charm.

ARCHIVIST

I've been wondering what they were doing down here. The worms must have been down here for – weeks, months maybe, spreading… growing. They could have spread all the way *through* these tunnels, but they didn't. They didn't find Leitner down here, didn't find Getrude's body, didn't find… whatever else is here.

HELEN

It *is* a maze. One of the reasons I like it.

ARCHIVIST

Hmm.

I can't See things properly here. I thought it was just me, something interfering with my connection to the Eye, but… I'm wondering: maybe it affects everything else? Like this place is some kind of – *universal* blind spot.

Everyone gets lost down here.

HELEN

What a *fascinating* idea.

("delicately" hinting) Although – some of us *are* always lost, in a sense.

ARCHIVIST

Wait, are you saying you can navigate it?

HELEN

Not exactly, but my door has been part of these tunnels for some time now.

ARCHIVIST

Wh – *(frustrated sputtering)* – what's it hiding, wh-what's in the middle?

HELEN

(suppressed laughter) A delightful surprise…!

[HE SIGHS. SHE LAUGHS, OVERLAPPING HIM AND HERSELF, SEEMINGLY OUT OF SEVERAL THROATS AT ONCE, AND WITH A DRAINED, SLEEPY QUALITY TO IT WHEN SHE FINDS THAT SHE HAS LAUGHED TOO LONG, AND MUST STOP TO INHALE. HER LAUGHTER, IN SHORT, NOW SOUNDS EXACTLY LIKE MICHAEL'S. THE ARCHIVIST SIGHS AGAIN, RESIGNED TO HER.]

Ah… But that's not why you're here, is it?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

I've been thinking a lot about Jane. She was the first, you know. The first I actually *encountered* like… *(tiny, resigned 'heh')* like us.

She seemed so… inhuman. Like everything she used to be was stripped away.

HELEN

And now…?

ARCHIVIST

I wonder how much of her was still in there. How much did she choose to be what she was? I read her statement, she was… *(inhale, exhale)* she was *scared.*

I *assumed* she'd been possessed completely against her will, but now

I'm not even sure that's *possible.*

HELEN

(leading) It is astounding the sort of thing you're willing to *choose* – given an unpleasant-enough alternative – isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

How much of willpower is just – *safety?* "Comfort" by another name. The *option* to choose and be fine.

HELEN

Hungry, are we?

ARCHIVIST

(angrily) That's not –

– I haven't *done* anything –

HELEN

– *yet.*

ARCHIVIST

(roughly) I feel like if I *don't*… I might *die.* Fade away into nothing.

HELEN

…

Do you… *Know* that?

ARCHIVIST

No. But I… *(frustrated noise)* I *can't* die. They *need* me.

HELEN

Come on, John, no excuses.

[HE SIGHS AS SHE SPEAKS.]

They don't need *your* protection.

ARCHIVIST

What, are *you* going to look after them?

HELEN

And how would *I* do that?

ARCHIVIST

You eat things as well.

HELEN

They have to open the door, Archivist. I can't just *push* them in.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, you've got *hands.*

HELEN

Sharp enough to pull out worms, kill a few old men – maybe *stab* an overeager Archivist –

[HE SIGHS.]

– but my physicality is as much an illusion as everything else about me. Think of me as… a *bear trap.* Not a sword.

But we're not talking about *me,* are we?

ARCHIVIST

…

When does it stop?

HELEN

(impatient) What?

ARCHIVIST

The guilt. The misery. All the others I've met, they've been – cold, cruel. They've *enjoyed* what they do. When does the Eye *(inhale)* make me monstrous?

[HELEN LAUGHS ONCE, THEN TWICE. THRICE.]

HELEN

What – why would it ever do that?

ARCHIVIST

I don't…

HELEN

When has your guilt, or your sadness, or your hand-wringing ever actually *stopped* you from doing what it wants?

ARCHIVIST

(stammering) I-I – I have not been taking *statements* –

HELEN

You've sworn of other people's trauma for now –

[HE CAN BE HEARD INHALING AS IF TO ARGUE AND THEN STOPPING HIMSELF AS SHE MOCKS HIM.]

– because you're *caught.* Because continuing would *endanger* you. But other than that, when has your discomfort ever actually *stopped* you walking the path of the Beholding?

ARCHIVIST

I… I don't know…

HELEN

Even if it were capable of doing so, what possible reason would the Eye have to change how you feel, when it makes no difference to your actions?

Helen was like you, at first.

[HE CAN BE HEARD INHALING UNHAPPILY IN THE BACKGROUND.]

She felt such *guilt* over taking people. Until one day she realized she wasn't going to stop doing it. So she *chose* to stop feeling guilty.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. I get it. My *feelings* mean nothing to it.

HELEN

Mh, not true! They carry a certain flavor, a… seasoning.

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) (bitter laugh) I see.

HELEN

(chuckling) I *am* enjoying our time together.

Well, you know my advice already. Cheerio, John. Enjoy your *brooding.*

[DOOR SWINGS SHUT.]

ARCHIVIST

(frustrated noise)

[CLICK]

MAG153 – Love Bombing

Statement #0120204

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Barbara Mullen-Jones, regarding her nine months spent with the Divine Chain cult. Original statement given on 2nd April, 2012. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Everyone thinks they're too smart to get involved in a cult. I'm sure you do.

You think that, of the first mention of aliens, or the end of the world, or the lost book of the Bible where Jesus buried his holy staff in the foothills of the Himalayas, you'd go running.

Trouble is, that misunderstands how it works. I mean, when I was with the Divine Chain, some of the smartest people there were also the most committed. Intelligence doesn't make you less prone to taking on bad ideas, it just makes you better at defending them to other people and to yourself. Smart people can believe some truly ridiculous things, and then deploy all the reason and logic at their

disposal to justify them, because a belief doesn't begin in your mind. It begins in your feelings. Cults are very good at finding you when you're at your lowest point, when you're your most emotionally vulnerable. And when you're at that point it's astounding what can crawl into your heart and start to fester there.

I hit my lowest point when I turned 41. That's when my life came crashing down, at least on the inside. From the outside I'm sure everything looked pretty much okay. I was getting gigs, I had a job, I had plenty of friends and a supportive family. But that was when I started to properly look at my life, and I really didn't like what was looking back. I was a stand-up comedian you see, and a really good one. That's not boasting, that's just the truth. And I'd always assumed that that was enough to eventually have real success, and for the first 10 years it seemed like I was right. I worked my way up, performed for basically nothing basically every night and got to be pretty successful.

And then I stayed that way for the next 10 years. Trouble is – do you know how much a "pretty successful" comedian makes? Let's just say I had a full-time office job and was still barely making rent. But between working full-time and gigging full-time I just kept putting off everything else in my life, always so sure the big time was just around the corner. This is the TV spot that gets me noticed, this is the sell-out fringe show that makes me mainstream, this is the deal that actually goes somewhere.

I made it through turning 40 with my self-image intact, but for some reason at 41, I just cracked. I realized I've spent most of my

life with nothing to show for it, but a few awards no one cares about, a string of awful comedian exes who broke up with me for being funnier than them, and a dreadful office job I was going to be working until I died because I'd never bothered to build a stable career. I was never going to own a home, I was never going to have kids, never going to have the life I'd spent my entire youth sacrificing for. And yes, I know that 41 isn't *actually* too late for most of that, but try telling that to someone who'd just decided they've wasted their life. I felt like I couldn't talk to anyone about it. My friends were all comedians who really didn't want to hear it, my family were blandly supportive to the point of uselessness. Oh, they had plenty of soothing platitudes, but platitudes wouldn't get me back 20 years. I was in a really bad place.

Then a friend recommended a meditation course to me. I thought I'd give it a shot. Obviously the meditation course didn't mention anything about the organization behind it. I had no idea it was anything other than a standard evening class, and it had exactly the right level of pseudo-mystical nonsense to it to get me comfortable. A little bit of tarot imagery here, some misinterpretation of chakras there, a touch of sweet-smelling incense to tie it all together and you have a meditation class that is exactly my level. I mean, let's put it like this – I don't believe in the power of crystals but I still have plenty dotted around my bedroom. I don't believe in astrology but I do have my birth chart on my wall, and like to check my horoscope, sun sign and ascendant every day. Just for fun, of course.

Anyway, the meditation part of it was actually really good. I'd never had much luck silencing my mind, but Joyce – the lady running it – was really good at bringing you to that space. It was surprisingly freeing. I started attending regularly. One thing she insisted on was the start of each session, we would all sit in a circle and tell the others what we liked about each other. Only compliments, only truth. The first few sessions, no one really knew the others well enough to offer anything more than general niceties, but as it went on and we became closer the affirmations became more personal. More meaningful. And it felt really good just to have all that positivity, that affection uncritically directed at you. I thought it would be cheesy, but it was just this incredible feeling of being wanted and appreciated.

You know, every comedian goes on about how they love the business, how great everyone is. Every one of them is lying. It's horrible and everyone in it is horrible, and being there, having people be genuinely lovely to me, I didn't

know what to do with those feelings. Apparently in organizations that monitor cults, this method is called love bombing. I think I'd even heard of it somewhere before, but that didn't make it any less effective.

I went to the meditation group for about three months, before Joyce mentioned a spiritual retreat she wanted us all to go on. It was in America,

a small community out in rural Arkansas, and all our expenses

would be taken care of. That should have sent alarm bells ringing, but by that point I trusted her so implicitly that I was just excited I wouldn't have to buy my own ticket. I won't bore you with the details of the rest of my indoctrination, once I got to the Divine Chains community – or compound, to use the classic term, though there weren't any fences or watchtowers. Suffice to say that there was more friendliness, support, meditation, and you know what? Really good food. I'm told that Arnold used to be a chef before they recruited him and well very much helped their cause.

I also met the leader of the organization, Claude Vilakazi, and he was so *nice*. People talk about charismatic dictators or cults of personality, but honestly you don't even know what charisma is until you meet someone like Claude. Everything you say is valid and important, you are always worthy of his time – and you know what? Deep down, you just think the same way. I mean, even now, after everything I still miss listening to him talk.

The Divine Chains philosophy was pretty simple. Throughout history there have been ten great links, holy figures of divine wisdom who were the manifested will of humanity to understand and better itself. All the heavy hitters you'd expect on the list: Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, Rama, Krishna – you get the idea. They weren't reincarnations, per se, but the same divine impulse for human elevation manifested in different people. Claude Vilakazi was *definitely not* claiming to be the Eleventh Link, oh no. But he had had a vision that the Eleventh was soon to be born, and that he was to be their herald and guardian. The actual practices were a

grab bag of all sorts of occultism, exactly what you'd expect from a group who laid claim to basically every major religion.

Honestly I don't know how much I actually believed any of it, but I felt like I belonged there. I sold what little I had in order to fully earn my place in the community and I stayed. I had shelter, food, all the companionship I could ask for. I spent my days working in the field. We actually produced one of the only American rounds of rice-wine, which was how the cult made most of its money. And it felt good to be working with my hands. When the whole thing collapsed the papers made all sorts of awful claims about the place, but I don't know if they were wholly made-up, or if they happened the whole time and I just didn't notice. Or if they came about after things started to change. Started to go rotten.

I wasn't there when they found the dog. Maybe if I had been, things would have been different. It was actually Joyce and a few others who stumbled across it while working the fields. The way they told it, it was thin and emaciated, barely able to walk and clearly suffering from some sort of sickness, but there was something in it that drew them closer. *(static builds)* As Joyce put it, we couldn't help but love it. They took it to Claude, who was just as taken with the thing, and decided to adopt it. He named the dog Agape in front of everyone and took it into his private room to be cared for. That was the last I saw of the thing and… honestly, I kind of forgot about it for the next few weeks. But that was the moment when things started to get really weird.

Claude announced at evening meal a few days later that he had

been dreaming of the Eleventh, and there were going to be some changes to help spiritually prepare us for their arrival. We needed to achieve a state of pure love. And to begin with, what that meant was that whenever we would meet one another or pass each other in the corridor or fields, we were to tell each other that we loved them. And, Claude said solemnly, you have to *mean* it. At the time it didn't seem so sinister and we all began to do it without question, until a week later when I bumped into Mary outside the showers.

I told her I loved her and began to walk on, when her arm shot out and grabbed me by the shoulder. She spun me to face her and looked me dead in the eye.

"*I don't believe you*," she said.

I mean, she was right. She and I had never really got on, just two different personalities, but in that moment I was suddenly terrified of what might happen if she thought I was lying about it. So I said it again, and I tried very hard to mean it. Her eyes bored into me and I noticed that they were yellow and sickly, like she had really bad jaundice. And she nodded once, turned, and left.

It was about that time that the rice wine started to go bad. Every batch we brewed came out cloudy and undrinkable. We couldn't figure out what was going on. I spent so long cleaning every piece of equipment over and over again, but it just kept happening. When we raised it with Claude or any of the others in the inner circle they would nod understandingly, then tell us it didn't matter, that it was no longer our concern now that the Eleventh was so close. All the

others seemed to accept this without question, and I didn't feel I could press the matter without drawing negative attention, something I was desperate to avoid doing. So I just sat there as it grew bitter, cloudy, and rancid. Nobody bothered to get rid of the wine and the smell gradually began to permeate through the building.

Those closest to Claude began to change as well. Everyone in the community had always been very touchy-feely, but now it seemed like they were always touching each other, or holding hands or in some way, pressing their skin to each other even at mealtimes or in situations where it seemed really awkward. A few times they touched me, hugged me or shook my hand, and each time I could feel myself struggling not to recoil. They'd stare at me with their yellowing eyes and their skin was dry and somehow sticky when I pressed it. It yielded ever so slightly like there wasn't anything solid inside. Even then, I didn't think to leave. I couldn't figure out what was going on but I trusted Claude so completely I couldn't imagine it was truly harmful.

Then came the day when he announced that the Eleventh had arrived. I expected cheers, excitement, but instead there were just murmurings of resolve and determination as though a difficult task lay ahead. Claude asked who was going to be the first to meet them. Everyone went quiet, awed by the sudden opportunity for divine benediction. He walked up and gently touched Joyce on the cheek, and she smiled with a happiness more pure than I'd ever seen on a human face.

We formed into a long line, a chain holding hands with Joyce at the very end of it. It stretched from one end of the building to the other. I was at the other end so didn't see what happened when she walked to Claude's private chambers, but as she did, something passed down the line. I don't know how to describe it really. Did you ever do that experiment in science class, where you held hands in a line and the teacher passed a very gentle electric shock down through the students, feeling of a charge going through you? It was like that but what passed through us was warm and slick, and seemed to flow through my body like oil and out into the ground. Everyone felt it. Their blissful smiles made me feel even more nauseated than the sensation itself. I never saw Joyce again.

Each day after evening meal, Claude chose someone else to meet the Eleventh. Each time, the same process, the same daisy-chaining of hands, at the end the same sick feeling sliding through me. Another member of the community gone, the line getting shorter. A fear fell over the others and at first I thought it was the same fear that I had, but when I heard them talk of it, what they feared was that they *wouldn't* get chosen. That somehow this chance for pure, divine love would pass them by. And I suddenly came to the realization that perhaps I didn't belong here like I thought I did.

So one night I decided to see for myself. I waited until after lights-out and slipped from the dormitory through the empty corridors towards Claude's private rooms. The moon was bright through the window, casting everything in stark pale shadow. As I got close, I began to smell it. It wasn't rancid, not like the wine, but sweet like

overripe fruit or sugar that's cooked too long. I found myself standing in front of the understated wooden door that I'd now seen almost a dozen people disappear into. My hand reached slowly for the handle, when I heard someone moving behind it.

No, it wasn't someone moving. It was many people, I'm sure of it. The sounds of dozens of limbs moving and stepping and shuffling in unison. Then laughter. Then weeping. Then movement again. I looked down at my shaking hand, and saw that seeping under the door was something slick and colorless, a greasy residue that smelled overpoweringly of that sickly sweet odor.

I took a step back, suddenly nauseated and almost fell into the arms of Claude, who had silently come up behind me. He held me for a moment,

looking with such intensity that I felt like he was weighing my soul, his expression unreadable. Then he sighed and shook his head.

"You do not belong here. You are not worthy of its love. Leave."

Even after everything I'd seen I can't tell you how deeply those words hurt me. I turned and I ran out of the building, out of the compound, out into the night. I ran until I reached a road, then sat there shaking until a passing car took pity on me and took me down to the local sheriff's office. Eventually my case got passed up the line; apparently a few different government agencies were interested in the Divine Chain, mainly for possible tax fraud, and my testimony was pretty much exactly what they needed to go in

there and check it out. They didn't tell me what they found until after I'd had a few sessions with a psychiatrist who specialized in cult deprogramming, and I'm sure it wouldn't be hard to find out most of the details online. I'm pretty sure it made national news.

There is one thing, however, that I think they lied about. The reports detailed a mass grave in the rooms of Claude Vilakazi with bodies mutilated and mixed together, some who'd been dead for weeks, but I don't believe that. Whatever was in that room, I am absolutely sure that when the authorities arrived it was still alive. I just don't know what alive means when it comes to something like that. It doesn't matter though. The compound was destroyed in an 'accidental generator explosion', and everything was gone.

There's a part of me that's glad, a sick little part that's happy, that whatever love was there, whatever I couldn't be a part of, is gone from the world. And no one else gets it either.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

I swear, I almost find the cult dedicated to the dark powers of fear easier to understand in the more mundane sort. At least they have some consistency. *(inhale)* This, well… the Corruption at work if I had to guess, though with unsettling echoes of uh, Fleshliness.

I suppose, uh –

[STATIC RISES]

Wait.

Oh, uh. *(clears throat)*

[A PHONE RINGS. THE ARCHIVIST'S LABORED BREATHING IS HEARD.]

Yeah, I think, um – I think you should probably get down he–

[THERE'S A LOUD THUD.]

TREVOR

Hello, lad.

JULIA

You miss us?

[JOHN MAKES A NOISE OF PROTEST, BUT IS SHOVED DOWN.]

JULIA

Sit. Down.

TREVOR

Or we check if you're still human enough to bleed.

[JULIA LAUGHS.]

JULIA

You've got something of ours.

TREVOR

Someone.

JULIA

Took him right from under our noses.

TREVOR

In our own house.

JULIA

I call that rude, don't you?

ARCHIVIST

Gerry wasn't yours. You had no right –

TREVOR

(mockingly) You hear that, Julia? "Gerry"!

JULIA

Sounds like you've got pretty chummy. *(threateningly)* Where is he?

ARCHIVIST

Gone.

JULIA

What do you mean, *gone*?

TREVOR

Not gonna ask you again, son.

ARCHIVIST

I burned the page. Released him.

[A PAUSE.]

TREVOR

Aren't that right noble of you?

JULIA

Proper humanitarian.

TREVOR

So. Let me get this straight. We take you in, protect you from the thing that's huntin' you –

JULIA

Spare your life even though you're no help –

TREVOR

– *help* you, give you access to one of our most valuable resources, and you steal it from us, piss off back to England, and then burn it? That's just inconsiderate.

ARCHIVIST

He asked me to.

JULIA

Oh really? You always do what evil books tell you to, do you?

TREVOR

Gotta say I'm disappointed. Genuinely thought you were different… but you're just another monster. Not even worth the chase.

JULIA

You want the honors, old man?

TREVOR

Don't mind if I do.

[THE TWO OF THEM CHUCKLE.]

DAISY

Get away from him.

TREVOR

Oh, who's this? You got yourself a watchdog?

DAISY

More of a lapdog. Scrawny isn't she?

DAISY

I said get back.

TREVOR

Malnourished I'd say. how long since you last tasted blood?

JULIA

You think you can take us both?

DAISY

I'd enjoy it. I'll start with you, old bastard, he's slower and doesn't guard his neck. And you worry about him too much, don't you? I go for him, you get sloppy. Predictable.

JULIA

Sure. Or I slit your little bookworm's throat.

DAISY

Do it. It'll give me a chance to finish off your dad.

TREVOR

I'm *not* her father.

ARCHIVIST

(winded) Not by blood maybe.

JULIA

Shut it.

[A LONG SILENCE. TREVOR TAKES A DEEP BREATH.] </ **span** >

TREVOR

Come on, Julia.

JULIA

What??

TREVOR

There's no rush. *(chuckling)* We've got all the time in the world. Besides, this place is just full of monsters. She can't guard 'em all.

JULIA

*(angered, labored breathing) F*ine.

[DAISY LETS OUT A BESTIAL GROWL.]

[THE DOOR SLAMS. SEVERAL MOMENTS OF SILENCE.]

ARCHIVIST

…thank you. I don't know – Daisy? *(Daisy groans)* Are you alright?

DAISY

Don't touch me.

ARCHIVIST

Christ, he was right, I didn't – didn't – when did you get so thin?

DAISY

I'm not, it's fine.

ARCHIVIST

It's the Hunt, isn't it? Without it –

DAISY

I'm *fine*. Just haven't been hungry. I'm strong enough.

ARCHIVIST

Clearly.

DAISY

They're not gone yet. We could still get them –

ARCHIVIST

Daisy, no. It's like you say. Don't listen to the blood.

DAISY

Listen to the quiet.

ARCHIVIST

Even so, if it's having this much of an effect –

DAISY

I'm not going back. I can't let it in again.

ARCHIVIST

But it… what if it kills you?

DAISY

Heh. Always said I was dedicated to justice.

ARCHIVIST

(concerned) Daisy. It's not – you can't think like that.

DAISY

John. Do you have any idea how much damage you can do if you're a police officer who wants to hurt people? How much the system

will protect you?

I managed to keep most of it from Basira, but –

ARCHIVIST

It wasn't you. That was the Hunt.

DAISY

We were the same.

ARCHIVIST

You'd never known anything different.

DAISY

Because I never wanted to. All that time trapped was good for one thing.

Thinking. And I did a lot of it. I've made my choice.

ARCHIVIST

Okay. So what do we do when they come back?

DAISY

I don't know.

ARCHIVIST

Come on. We'd better tell Basira.

[CLICK]

MAG154 – Bloody Mary

Statement #0082107

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, ARCHIVIST'S OFFICE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) Hm. *(sharp inhale)* I've, uh, I've been doing a lot of thinking after what happened with Daisy last week. About – what I can do. What I am. What feels – right.

I found a – erm, I went back to Eli– Peter's office, to that box of tapes, started rifling through. And I started to pay attention to the ones I… *wasn't* drawn to. The tapes I instinctively wanted to discard.

There was one, this one, that my hand… pulled back from. I dropped it, twice, when I went to pick it up. Even now, I'm… *(slight quaver to his voice)* struggling to hit play.

I am the avatar of awful knowledge and revealed secrets, so what does it *not*want me to know?

[Long sigh.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, ARCHIVIST'S OFFICE, 2008]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

GERTRUDE

(sharp sigh) Right. No use putting it off further.

[We hear the rustle of paper. Gertrude begins to read.]

GERTRUDE

"When he opened his eyes, he saw nothing, but he heard her breathing, slow and steady and focused, and he immediately knew that she was finally going to – *(slight stumble)* – kill him. When the garden shears plunged into his chest, he was surprised by how little actual pain there was – just the sudden feeling of moisture on his chest and the realization that his body was growing weak, fading away.

He wished she would say she was sorry she was doing this, that she loved him, that she would miss him. But he knew better, and his final thought was a gentle sadness at how little he was surprised."

[As she reads, a static begins, first a relatively standard crackling, that soon evolves into a deeper, more whooshing sound.]

GERTRUDE

"And so Eric Delano ended."

[The whooshing sound forms more clearly into a shaking breath.]

GERTRUDE

…Eric?

ERIC DELANO

Gertrude, I – Wha– What am I doing here?

[Following every word he speaks is an echo, light and airy and ghostly. His voice itself is soft, almost comforting in its monotony.]

GERTRUDE

Mary. She gave me your page.

ERIC

She! – Oh.

GERTRUDE

Yes. Well. I'm sorry.

ERIC

Wasn't even hard for her, was it? Handing me over? No sign of regret.

GERTRUDE

(still a bit shaky) No.

ERIC

No.

GERTRUDE

I'm sorry, Eric; I know this must be hard – I just read your death. I didn't realize it would quite so…

[She trails off, flaps the page at him.]

ERIC

You should have seen what she did to my body afterwards.

GERTRUDE

Did *you?*

ERIC

Oh, yes. She bound me afterwards and made me watch. Don't know why. Wasn't really in the best state to ask. Maybe she just wanted some company.

GERTRUDE

…While she disposed of your body?

ERIC

God, I was a mess. I mean, part of me kind of suspected she'd killed before, but clearly she hadn't done it enough to be a decent hand at chopping up and dumping bodies. *(heh.)* She was having a real hard time of it. My legs were all over the shop. *(long inhale)* Would probably have been funny, if it hadn't been me.

GERTRUDE

What's it like? Being bound to the book?

ERIC

I don't know how to describe it. Never was great with words.

Bad. It feels bad. All the time.

I know that I'm not really Eric; I'm just a memory someone wrote down. It hurts, most of the time. I don't like it.

GERTRUDE

But, you're still here.

ERIC

I suppose. Mary used to get me up to bounce ideas off of. Talk through her thoughts and theories. Never listened to me, obviously, but *(light, pointed)* nothing new there.

GERTRUDE

Well, it's good to see you. I suppose.

ERIC

You too. *(beat)* You got *old.*

GERTRUDE

Better than being dead.

ERIC

(short sigh of a laugh) Fair enough. To be honest, I'm impressed, more than anything. Hard to get old in this business. You either die, or you, uh, stay young. *(short, uncomfortable pause)* …How did Mary look?

GERTRUDE

(same sort of short laugh) She got old, too.

ERIC

S'pose that makes sense. And Gerry? Have you seen my son?

GERTRUDE

No; I've never met him, I'm afraid. Mary talks of him a lot. Well, she seems very proud.

ERIC

That's…not as reassuring as you think it is.

GERTRUDE

I see your point.

[Short pause.

ERIC

Why did she give me to you?

GERTRUDE

I-I **don't know.** She seemed to think it was a gift.

ERIC

Mm, charming.

GERTRUDE

She said she had one final mystery to explore. With the book.

ERIC

Oh. *Oh.* You know what that means, don't you?

GERTRUDE

I have a pretty strong suspicion, yes.

[Eric *hehs*.]

GERTRUDE

What?

ERIC

Oh, just thinking. Five years as her husband, god knows how many as her possession, and she just couldn't stand being bound in the same book as me.

GERTRUDE

Hm. I'm sorry.

ERIC

Yeah, it doesn't feel great. But being dead, I s'pose you don't feel things quite as strongly. Little bit – flat.

I'm aware of the heartbreak, but I don't know if I actually feel it. It's strange, really.

GERTRUDE

Yes. Yes, it sounds it.

[Eric takes a slow, deep breath.]

ERIC

So what now?

GERTRUDE

I'm not entirely sure. I was probably going to burn you, if you're amenable to the idea.

ERIC

…Yes. Yes, I think that would be for the best.

GERTRUDE

I'm just trying to figure out if there was a reason she gave you to me. The way she was smiling… as if she was handing over a secret.

ERIC

I don't know. *(sigh)* Do you have any questions? Any unfinished business?

GERTRUDE

(heh-hm) Of course. When she killed you, there were plenty of outstanding cases and such, but nothing that would still be relevant.

ERIC

Sorry, what do you mean?

GERTRUDE

Well, you were working on quite a few statements when she killed you.

ERIC

Gertrude, I left the Archives months before she killed me.

GERTRUDE

What? No. That's – That's not possible.

ERIC

Of course. They didn't tell you. Why would they? Mary probably thought it was funnier if you didn't know, and Wright would have preferred you not to know. How is he, by the way?

GERTRUDE

James? He died about twelve years ago. Elias is Head of the Institute now.

ERIC

Elias? Elias **Bouchard**, seriously?!

GERTRUDE

Hm, he's changed a lot.

ERIC

Must have!

GERTRUDE

So. What did they not want me to know?

ERIC

I quit.

GERTRUDE

You – Sorry, you **quit**?

ERIC

Yeah. I figured out how.

GERTRUDE

I – I just assumed –

How?

ERIC

Well, that's it, isn't it? I suppose that's why she gave me to you. One final *screw you* to the Eye.

GERTRUDE

Eric. How did you quit?

[Eric holds back.]

GERTRUDE

(warning) Eric…

ERIC

(short laugh) Sorry. I just – *(laugh)* I don't mean to be a *dick*, but – well, it's been a long time since I've had any sort of – leverage, I guess? Just a – little bit of power. It's kind of nice.

GERTRUDE

Are you going to tell me?

ERIC

Thinking about it.

GERTRUDE

Think harder,

ERIC

You know, you were never actually all that nice to me when I worked for you, Gertrude. Not like Michael, or Emma.

GERTRUDE

Eric…

ERIC

What, you gonna threaten me? Look at me. Best I can currently hope for is to be burnt to ash. *(inhale, sharp sigh)* I'm going to tell you, just – maybe there's a price?

GERTRUDE

What do you want?

ERIC

I don't know – I haven't had a chance to think.

GERTRUDE

Eric.

ERIC

Fine! *(short pause)* I want two things.

GERTRUDE

(impatient) I'm listening.

ERIC

I want you to find my son. If Mary is – if she's *gone*, or worse, I want you to make sure he's alright.

GERTRUDE

(amused) Hm. I'm not exactly a mother figure.

ERIC

You could hardly do worse than *her*.

GERTRUDE

Hm. Fine. But I don't know what growing up with Mary has done to him. If he's… gone rotten, I can't promise anything.

ERIC

I understand.

GERTRUDE

I suppose he might be useful.

ERIC

(dry as the Sahara) Oh, sentimental as ever.

GERTRUDE

Hm. And the second thing?

ERIC

I want to make my statement.

GERTRUDE

Is that really necessary?

ERIC

I don't want to disappear on *her* terms. Or yours. I want to speak my piece, have it recorded.

GERTRUDE

Fine. Tape's running.

Subject is Eric Delano, recorded 21st of July, 2008, regarding…

ERIC

What else? Me, Mary, and the Archives.

GERTRUDE

As you wish. Begin whenever you're ready.

ERIC

(exhale) I'm almost not sure where to start, now it comes to it.

I always loved ghosts. They fascinated me. Not the rattling chains and horror part of it, of course, but the mystery, the promise of secret knowledge, of seeing something that no one else was privy to. A secret world that gripped my imagination.

So when I finished my Masters in library science and saw a vacancy at the Magnus Institute, of all places, I jumped at the chance. The chance to pursue my passion and my career at the same time seemed like too good an opportunity to pass up! It was only an

assistant archivist position, of course, but that was fine.

A good entry position – I'd, I'd soon move on, I told myself.

Heh. *Yeah.*

And for the first few years, it was pretty much exactly the job I'd expected. Longer hours than I'd hoped, and the Archivist seemed less interested in doing her job than I was, but all told there were worse places to work.

Then I met *Mary.* She was like no one I'd met before in my life. She was *beautiful,* like a – like a shark is beautiful. Every moment she made was deliberate, sharp, and her eyes were always focused on something, always watching. And when she looked at me, I always felt afraid.

But there was something else. Something *under* the fear. Something that made me feel very aware of all my blood. *(exhale)* I don't know what she saw in me, not really. But when she walked up to me and told me that I was taking her to dinner, I couldn't help but nod.

I've always been – *(sheepish laugh)* Well, now, I wouldn't call myself a *coward,* but I've never been in a fight. Never even been punched. Maybe it's – luck. Maybe it's the fact that I can never really bring myself to push back from people.

And Mary pushed *so hard.* Harder, even, than you. And I let her, because she gave me something I had never before experienced: Danger.

The things she taught me, had me do – I'd never known anything like it. Whenever I kissed her, it tasted like *blood.*

I knew what she was, I, I think. What she was capable of. But I convinced myself that I was safe, that she loved me. It made me feel special. That I was somehow protected from all the cold cruelty that she tried to keep hidden, but leaked out in so many ways.

I remember visiting her, shortly after she'd started her books business. I found her sitting opposite a corpse, a well-dressed middle-aged man who sat in a huge armchair she kept in the back office. She looked me in the eye and told me he was her uncle, prone to drink, making an unexpected visit, and had passed out in the chair. *(amused, wistful hm)* I knew she didn't have an uncle. I knew the man was dead.

She didn't lie to me because she expected me to believe her; she lied to me because she expected me to **obey** her. And I did. We rescheduled our date to the following day.

But d'you know what the strange thing is? Despite the violence, death, even my own murder, I still don't feel like she… *betrayed* me. She was what she was. And I knew that. And even though I told myself that she would never harm *me* – of course not! I was her husband, her true love – even then, the only one lying was me.

She never promised anything, not even in her vows. **She** never betrayed me. Not like you. She never played dumb when I was stalked by bloated, blood-soaked things, or told me I was imagining

it when your friend Adelard dropped a screaming box into the Thames. She didn't try to keep me in the dark just so I wouldn't stop being useful; she never made me complicit in a thousand different nightmares, and lives ruined for the sick joy of some otherworldly voyeur.

Compared to that, I suppose a few murders were easier to stomach.

But I couldn't be part of it. Not once Mary told me what was really going on.

I know what you say, what you *think* you're doing, saving the world one poor doomed soul at a time – I mean, I understand; I do. *(exhale)* But I couldn't be a part of it. Not when I saw what happened to everyone else you involved.

I had to get out, to escape this place. I had a *son* to look after; he needed me!

Or so I thought.

And that's when *you* turned nasty, isn't it? When all your resources, they no longer want to serve your purpose. I suppose you didn't know there was a way out, a way to escape. But if you had, would you have told me?

Mary, at least, played straight with me. She knew all about the Institute. And when we were married, when she was sure I could handle it, she laid it all out for me: the rituals, the Powers, all the messy little cogs of the games you play with the universe.

She laid out her own plans as well, her dreams of power. In many ways, I suppose they were no better than yours. But at least *she* didn't bother to hide behind noble aims.

Maybe that's why I chose her, in the end. At least she was *honest. (pfft)* Or perhaps I actually was afraid. Terrified of the crossroads where I'd found myself, and I chose the option I thought might keep Gerry safe.

At least if I was home *with* him, I could perhaps soften the edges of his mother.

I suppose I never really understood. No matter how clear the situation was, how well it was explained to me, I just couldn't see the parts of it that I didn't want to.

Two years, I tried to figure out how to quit, how to leave this place. And when I finally did, when I felt the Watcher's grip slip away, it left me in such a state I was no longer useful to Mary, and… she did what Mary does. *(short laugh)* It was fitting, I suppose. Even after everything, she made me taste blood one last time.

GERTRUDE

Well, thank you for that. I'll make sure it's stored somewhere – safe.

[Eric inhales shakily.]

ERIC

Right.

GERTRUDE

Something wrong?

ERIC

I just – *(small sigh)* I thought it would be more of a relief.

GERTRUDE

Mm. I'm sorry it wasn't as cathartic as you were hoping. But we had an agreement.

ERIC

Yeah. I know.

GERTRUDE

So. How did you do it? How did you quit the Archives?

ERIC

It was actually really simple. Not easy, but simple. *(heh)* You'll kick yourself when I tell you.

GERTRUDE

(get on with it) O…kay…

ERIC

You were almost there, you know, with your theory that James could watch us from any eye, even an illustration. What did *you* do? How did *you* sever that link?

GERTRUDE

My God!

ERIC

I left to avoid dragging my family, my son into this life, to *try* to look after him. But Mary decided that a newly blinded husband was simply too much of a burden.

GERTRUDE

Did you need to do anything special? Any… ritual, or…?

ERIC

Just as long as they're useless. I went the extra mile, destroyed them completely, but – I'm sure you'll find something *(inhale)* neater.

A strong acid, precisely applied? That sounds more your style, *if* you decide to do it, that is.

GERTRUDE

(conflicted sound) Well, I don't know.

ERIC

No. It’s not an easy sacrifice to make, is it?

GERTRUDE

I still have work to do.

ERIC

Don’t you always.

GERTRUDE

Yeah. Well, *(exhale)* I think I’ll rather do some research of my own, before the rather extreme step of blinding myself.

ERIC

It’s the only way. Trust me, I tried them all.

GERTRUDE

Yes. I remember.

ERIC

So, was there anything else?

GERTRUDE

No. No, I don’t think so.

ERIC

Then if you don’t mind? I think I’d like to go away now.

[Slightest of pauses.]

GERTRUDE

Yes.

I think that's probably for the best. You're certain burning will work?

ERIC

If it doesn't, I'm sure you'll figure something out.

GERTRUDE

Then let's get it over with.

ERIC

If you see Mary again, tell her – *(beat)* No. I guess there's not really anything else to say.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, ARCHIVIST'S OFFICE, PRESENT]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The Archivist sighs heavily.]

ARCHIVIST

Fuck.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ????, LATER]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Typing sounds. A small sigh-cum-whistle.]

MARTIN

(still typing) Oh. Hi. Hello again.

[He keeps typing.]

MARTIN

(small laugh) Sorry pal, false alarm this time.

[He stops typing.]

MARTIN

(sigh, voice darkens dramatically) Unless-*Peter.*

[The clock ticks in the background]

MARTIN

Look, Peter, I –

[The door is thrown open. The Archivist bursts in.]

ARCHIVIST

Martin!

MARTIN

(overlapping) Oh – *(voice more whispered)* John! *(he drops something)* God, don't *do* that!

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, I just –

MARTIN

No, it's fine! I j– you just surprised me, that's – *(surprised)* Jesus, you alright? You – You look like *hell.*

ARCHIVIST

Oh! Uh, Ri, Right, I um, God, I get weak. Hungry, I guess, sort of. I, I've been trying to avoid, being, um – sticking to old statements?

Thank you for your little *intervention*, by the way.

MARTIN

Look, I wouldn't have to if you'd hadn't been –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Yes no, I know, I know; I'm sorry; that didn't come out right; honestly, thank you. It's been hell, but – I, I did need to hear it.

MARTIN

(pleasantly surprised) Oh, um. Uh-h, good. Are the others – helping?

ARCHIVIST

(:))))_ Oh. They've been keeping a, um, *very* close eye on me. *(half laugh)* Well, that's not important – no, well, it *is* important, but it's, it's not why I'm here, I –

MARTIN

John. Calm down. What do you *want?*

ARCHIVIST

I know. I know what you said, but I just – *(inhale)* I think I've found a way for us to leave the Institute.

[Brief pause.]

MARTIN

O-kay…?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. But it's – *(heavy inhale)* It's pretty drastic.

MARTIN

(hah) What, you going to gouge your eyes out, or something?

[Beat.]

MARTIN

(gets it) Fuck off.

Right. *(unable to make words)* Uh, uh, right, uh… *(groping for words continues)* Erm… like, I mean… permanently? Or…

ARCHIVIST

I, I, I don't know; I suppose. I-If your vision comes back, the Beholding probably does as well – probably. But i-it's not like it's easy to only blind yourself temporarily anyways I – I –

MARTIN

(weak) Uh, y-yeah, yeah, uh… H-Have you told the others, or?…

ARCHIVIST

No, you're the first.

MARTIN

Why?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, because… because, because I trust you. I, I'm trying to think about what to do, and I… *(exhale)* If I did try this, I don't want to do it alone. But we could leave here, you and me. Escape.

MARTIN

(weary) John. Don't do this.

ARCHIVIST

Do what?

MARTIN

Make it *my* decision.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not –

MARTIN

I mean, *(mirthless laugh)* Could you even survive at this stage? Is there anything else keeping you alive?

ARCHIVIST

(squawk) Uh, I, I don't know. I don't – know. But… maybe it's worth it? The risk – y-you and me, together, getting out of here –

[Martin sniffs.]

ARCHIVIST

– one way or another.

MARTIN

John.

[He gives a small sigh.]

ARCHIVIST

(sharp exhale) No. No, o-of course, this was stupid; you have your own plans going on, don't you?

MARTIN

Just – Look, I *need* to see this thing through with Peter to the end. If, If what he's saying is even *half* true, I need to be there.

ARCHIVIST

But what if you *don't*? *(small exhale)* We could just *leave.* I mean, whatever their plan is for me, I am damn sure that doing that isn't it. I'd derail everything – *we* could derail everything, and then just – *leave!*

[When Martin laughs, all humorless and dry, it nearly sounds like he's crying.]

ARCHIVIST

What?

[Martin keeps laughing.]

MARTIN

Nothing; It's just – *(one more laugh)* It's just ironic, that's all.

ARCHIVIST

Martin…

MARTIN

Who are you kidding, John? You're not going to do any of that.

ARCHIVIST

I, I *could.*

MARTIN

(still brimming with false laughter) But you *won't.* That's why you came to *me,* isn't it?

[The Archivist exhales.]

MARTIN

You know I can't do it, not now; you don't want to blind yourself; you don't want to *die;* what you **want** is a reason to *not* do those things, so – you come to me.

Well, you're welcome. B-because I can't follow you on this one.

[The Archivist has been exhaling repeatedly during this performance.]

ARCHIVIST

The Lonely's really got you, hasn't it?

MARTIN

(no hesitation) You know, I think it always did.

[Small pause.]

ARCHIVIST

(quiet) Maybe. *(beat)* Well, I'll be here, if you ever need me.

MARTIN

(also quieter, softer) I hope so.

ARCHIVIST

(faster) Just-don't-wait-too-long-okay?

[He moves towards the door, sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

If you haven't already.

[He opens the door, leaves. It shuts.]

MARTIN

Yeah. *(wearier)* Yeah.

MAG155 – Cost of Living

Statement #0020312

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Any luck?

BASIRA

No. If they're still around, they're staying hidden.

ARCHIVIST

Not like there's any shortage of places to lay low.

BASIRA

Hmm. London's what, 600 square miles?

ARCHIVIST

607.

BASIRA

(sighs) Whatever.

ARCHIVIST

So I guess we'll want to look out for a pair of homeless serial killers now. I'll add it to the list.

BASIRA

No sign of Annabelle either.

ARCHIVIST

You still on that?

BASIRA

You're not?

ARCHIVIST

I mean… I don't know how much she can predict or manipulate the future, but I think she's proven she can at least avoid us finding her.

BASIRA

Yeah, well, it makes me feel better.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose that's something. How's Daisy?

BASIRA

I don't know. She's recovered from your little… confrontation, but she's still getting weaker. I'm worried she's –

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

BASIRA

Why did you call her and not me?

ARCHIVIST

Honestly, I panicked. Her name came up first on my phone.

BASIRA

I'm trying to convince her to go after them. To, uh… Hunt them.

ARCHIVIST

Why?

BASIRA

Because I'm not going to lose her.

ARCHIVIST

She goes hunting again, you might anyway.

BASIRA

And if she doesn't, she might die.

ARCHIVIST

Something you're fine with in certain other cases, and something she's made peace with.

BASIRA

Because of the guilt she feels over the stuff the Hunt made her do. It's not her fault.

ARCHIVIST

Earlier, when she was still out of it, I… I saw some of the things she was talking about, some of the things she did while she was police. I'm not convinced I disagree with her assessment.

Do you want me to tell you?

BASIRA

No. No I don't.

ARCHIVIST

You knew, didn't you? You knew the sort of things she did, and you let her.

BASIRA

No. Not exactly. I thought… It's not that simple.

ARCHIVIST

It never is. But that doesn't make it okay.

BASIRA

None of us are who we were, John.

ARCHIVIST

No. I suppose not. In many ways it's simpler now isn't it? At least now our demons have names.

BASIRA

Hmm.

ARCHIVIST

Have you thought any more about what I said?

BASIRA

Yeah, I don't think I can. Daisy wouldn't come if I didn't, and I'm not leaving her behind. Besides, both of us being blind would be… anyway, being stuck here isn't exactly her main problem right now.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose not.

BASIRA

And with those Hunters still out there –

ARCHIVIST

No, I understand. Just wanted to make sure you knew you had the choice.

BASIRA

Yeah. Anyway, I should go check on her.

ARCHIVIST

Sure. Do you mind closing the door?

BASIRA

Statement time.

[DOOR SWINGS SHUT]

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) Statement of Tova McHugh regarding their string of near-death experiences. Original statement given December 3rd, 2002. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

You've got to understand, I have so much to live for. Oh, okay, that's not quite it. I know most people have plenty to live for, but what I mean is that my life does good. I put a lot into the world. Did you read about that homelessness initiative that got 8,000 people into shelters? That was me. I've financed drug projects, organized inner city violence initiatives. I've always been so aware of the position I'm in, and keen to use that power to actually help

people. And that's not money from some trust fund. I mean sure my parents loaned me the money to start, but I built my business up from the ground, and we now provide jobs for almost 700 people. And I *know* that everyone's life has value, but I just need to be clear that my impact on the world is a positive one. My existence does a lot of good, and that's only gotten more true since all this started. I've given more, spent more time on charitable stuff, and helped more people. Sorry, I'm just… aware of how this story makes me look and I don't want you to think I'm some selfish monster grinding people up just to extend my own ghoulish life. I'm trying to do good.

I've always tried to live a healthy life; never smoked or did drugs, watched my diet, got plenty of exercise. So when I had an epileptic seizure, the first one of my entire life, the month before my wedding… that wasn't fair. I mean, even if I had to have epilepsy – which I could live with – having my first attack at the top of a staircase, five weeks before the happiest day of my life, that's just *not fair!* There was no reason for it, I'd done everything right! It shouldn't have happened like that.

I remember the odd tingling feeling rising up from my stomach, through my lungs, until it hit my head. I'd never felt anything like it. I didn't know what to do and even if I had I don't know if I could have done it in time. I don't remember falling exactly, just the world spinning and moving around me as I remained absolutely still. There were these cracks, like gunshots in my head. And even now I don't know if that was part of the seizure, or how my mind

processed the breaking bones. Then I was on the ground, looking back up the stairs, and thinking to myself how strange it was that I wasn't there. I'd been stood just there, so why couldn't I see myself? Everything seemed very loud, then very quiet, then very bright. The last thing I saw was a man rushing to help. He was wearing a t-shirt with a silly little cartoon alien on it, and I thought, *was that from an advert?* And then I went away.

You know, it's strange. I'd never really feared death. I'm agnostic… Was agnostic… And always thought that if there was a God, then He'd know what was in your heart, and if you'd lived a good life then you'd be alright. But more likely I thought it would be nothing. No heaven or hell, no thought or sensation, just… Nothing. You wouldn't even notice you were gone. But it wasn't like that at all. I don't know if I have words for it. How can you describe being aware of the absence of everything? Life. Light. Warmth. It was very dark, and very cold. It dawned on me that this might be my existence forever. There, beyond time, and I tried so desperately to scream, but I had no lungs or throat in that dreadful place. I couldn't even cry. Then I was back in the light with such a sudden jolt that I found myself trying to blink, even though I had no eyelids or even eyes. But I could still see.

I was standing in what seemed to be an operating theatre. Doctors and nurses in scrubs and masks buzzed around and through me, busy with something on the long table in the center of the room. It didn't take me long to realize that what they were busy with was me. I didn't look like myself, so bruised and discolored, with a great

gash on my forehead. Is it odd to say that this sight filled me with relief? There was a sudden rush of realization. I wasn't dead, I was having a near-death experience! I'd read about people having encounters almost exactly like this one, and they had seemed fine. I might still be okay. I might live. Then I became aware of a long, steady droning sound, and my vision turned to the flat unmoving line on the heart rate monitor. The panic I felt before returned all at once, but now focused, acute. I didn't have any arms but still I tried to reach out, flailing towards the doctor who was leaning over my body, trying to restart my heart. And then I felt something. I felt myself reach into his chest, held the strong steady beat of his heart. Calm. Calm while I was lying dead on the table. There was a sudden moment of rage and hate that flowed out of me down at his torso, and he began to convulse. He staggered backwards from the table arms dropping to his side, struggling to speak. And I heard the drone of the monitor turning to a *beep. Beep. Beep.* And I was gone.

When I woke up I was lying in a hospital bed, very much alive although the faces around me were grave. I asked her what had happened, and one of the nurses very kindly explained to me about the seizure, my fall, and what my recovery might look like going forward. But I could tell she was holding something back, and after some pressing, she finally told me that the doctor who saved my life had suffered a fatal heart attack while he was treating me. I didn't tell her about what I saw, what I was trying to convince myself was a simple dream. A bizarre near-death experience. I couldn't have killed him, it wasn't possible. But there was no point to putting that thought out into the world anyway. I just had to try and forget.

My recovery time was nothing short of miraculous. Within a couple of days I was out of the hospital, and my broken bones all seemed to be clean breaks that healed very fast. In the end, we didn't even need to delay the wedding and… despite everything, it was perfect. The church was magnificent, the reception the most fun I've had in years, and Daven was exactly the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. In lieu of gifts, we asked people to donate to a local children's charity, and they sent us a wonderful thank-you card. We honeymooned in the Caribbean, and everything was right with the world.

It was a year later that I slipped in the shower and cracked my head on the tap. I hadn't had any further seizures, and in fact the doctors hadn't be able to find any trace of epilepsy in my scans at all. No, this was simply a freak accident. Could have happened to anybody, but it happened to me. Again I found myself in that dark, cold place, and this time I simply waited, hoping against hope that this time, it wouldn't be forever. And to my great relief, it wasn't. Again I found myself present over my own body, a severed presence watching as the water continued to beat down on my unmoving form. I was starting to develop a suspicion, a vague idea of what might be going on. There was no one else around. Daven was on a business trip and I was alone in the house. I tried to move and I could. It almost felt like walking though I had no legs to carry me. Unable to touch the bathroom door, I simply moved through it, then out into the world, looking for something I couldn't quite name.

Perhaps that doctor had not been an accident. Perhaps his death and my life had been one and the same. Did I have to do it again? The idea appalled me to my core, but it seemed the only explanation. I *had* to live, I couldn't die, not then. We were on the verge of closing a deal that would provide fresh water to impoverished communities in a dozen developing countries. Without me, it would fall through. So I kept moving, senses attuned to what I needed, and I found her sitting in a park all on her own. An old woman, frail and shivering, staring out of the ducks over the water, empty bread bag by her side. If only I could have explained it to her, I'm sure she would have understood. She might even have agreed. But I couldn't talk to her, and I needed to live. She was found dead of a stroke, and I woke up in my shower with a splitting headache.

I thought I'd solved it. If anything else like that happened, I knew what I needed to do. But when I began to have a fatal allergic reaction during a lunch date only two weeks later, despite having no allergies previously, I realized I had miscalculated. Perhaps it was life itself that I was taking, and the old woman that had hardly any left in her, and it had run out too fast. This time I sought out a homeless man. Young and strong, though his life was clearly over as he tried to destroy himself through drinking. I followed him into an alley, and his liver gave out, just at the moment the EpiPen was pushed into my leg. But even that seemed to run out faster than it should have. The car accident was only three months later, and I even found myself resenting the poor vagrant for not having more life to sustain me.

I made a decision. One I am deeply ashamed of, but I honestly thought it was for the best. I couldn't keep living like that in the shadow of death, of what I had to do to keep going. One sacrifice, I thought. Just one, from someone with their entire life ahead of them. I took a newborn. It's strange, the maths you do of it all. A full life ahead of it, but aside from the devastated parents, no real harm to the world as a whole. No good works left unfinished. It was a baby born to poverty, one whose life I thought would bring it pain, and I believed it would be the last I would ever need to do. Surely this would be enough, surely it would see me through to the time I was actually meant to die. That I could go peacefully into oblivion, not trapped in that dreadful darkness. But it kept me alive for 10 months, still less than the doctor. Eventually I realized it had nothing to do with age or health. It was about connection. About joy. The more friends, family, loved ones the person has, the further out the terror of sudden death spreads from me. The longer it keeps me alive.

I'm 40 now, and I have taken the life of beloved mothers, respected professionals, pillars of the community. But I have done so much good with my life, I've reached further helped more people than they ever could have. Since this became my existence I've thrown myself into philanthropy harder than ever, and the world is so much better for me being in it. I'm not saying how I live is right, or good, but it is the position I have been put in, and a decision I have to make. I never wanted to weigh up the value of a life, to set it on the scales against my own, but that's a choice that I am forced into. And it is one I will continue to make.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

What is the value of a life? Is it something that can be quantified, put down as numbers, good deeds, bad? And when your life your existence is at the cost of doing harm, what then? I've – *(laughs)* I've saved the world, the *whole* world. Does that give me the right to take what I need to survive? I've been reading nothing but these old, dry statements for so long, I – I feel weak. Like I'm fading away. Do I restrain myself, keep my appetite in check, even at the cost of my life? Or do I try to rationalize what I am, like Ms. McHugh? I find myself *hating* her, her callous self-deception. But am I so different? Daisy's chosen to resist in her own way, knowing full well it might take her life in the end, Melanie too. I respect them for it, but I – I don't know if I can follow their path.

I suppose I have a way out now. One that wouldn't even kill me, at least, I hope not. And yet here I am still. Am I a coward? I just… what if they need me? What if.

[MELANIE KNOCKS ON DOOR]

ARCHIVIST

Oh, come in, Melanie. Funny, I was just… how are you?

MELANIE

I'm… good, actually. Uh, yeah. Yeah. I am good.

ARCHIVIST

You sound like you've made a decision.

MELANIE

I have, yes.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

MELANIE

Thanks for telling me, by the way. It didn't look like it was easy for you.

ARCHIVIST

It wasn't. I don't think, uh… I don't think *it* wants to lose anyone, but I thought you of all people deserve the option.

MELANIE

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

But I understand it's a big thing. We'll keep looking. Maybe there's another way –

MELANIE

No, John. I'm going to do it. I'm quitting.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. You're sure you've thought it through? I don't know if we can look after you, you know? Afterwards.

MELANIE

You won't need to. I've – I've made a few arrangements, and… *(shaky breath)* it's going to be okay. Honestly. I think it is. I – I can't be a part of this anymore and if this is the price, then I think I'm okay to pay it.

(inhale) It's – it's the rest of you I'm worried about.

ARCHIVIST

We'll be fine. Always have been.

MELANIE

(scoffs lightly) Not always.

ARCHIVIST

No, I guess not.

…well, if you're sure.

MELANIE

I won't be around after this, but I'll leave details in case you need to

get in touch, um, but…

ARCHIVIST

I understand.

How are you planning on doing it?

MELANIE

Got, uh, got one of those awls from the book repair suppliers, up in the library? *(shakily)* If it can punch through books it can punch through, uh… Well it – it should do the trick. No reason to try and make it too complicated.

ARCHIVIST

I – I suppose not.

MELANIE

I've left a proper resignation letter on Lukas's desk. It was quite satisfying to write, actually. Almost made me wish it was Elias. He would have *hated* me not serving out my two weeks notice, heh. Not sure Lukas even knows who I am… probably for the best.

ARCHIVIST

We'll miss you.

MELANIE

(wryly) Wish I could say the same.

ARCHIVIST

(quietly) Yeah. Do you need any, uh… help?

MELANIE

(deep breath) No. I've got this. But if you, um… If you could…

In five minutes, I would appreciate it if you could call me an ambulance.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[CLICK]

MAG156 – Reflection

Statement #0090401

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ????]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Rustling of paper. In the background, the clock ticks.]

MARTIN

Mm? *(beat)* Oh.

[He laughs, gently.]

MARTIN

Yeah. *(rustling paper)* I was going to read one. Hate for you to miss it!

[Short, forced laugh, as he flaps the statement around.]

MARTIN

You know, I- I've been wondering about your batteries. Like, could I just take the batteries out each time one of you appears, and just- have an infinite supply of batteries? I mean- I won't; don't worry,

don't really have anything that needs them these days.

Also, I know there's every chance that you don't even have any, and it's just empty, and, well… I'm not really sure that's something I want to confirm.

Or, I open up your compartment and it's like- meat, or maggots, or something. *(slight pause, contemplative)* Mm.

Emptiness or maggots. *(he exhales)* It's kinda the shape of things around here, isn't it?

Still, kind of nice to talk to some…thing? *(sigh as he speaks)* It's always quiet, these days. For me, at least.

I guess I technically have the power to make it not quiet, to, to talk to people, but like- you know, I, I also have the power to clean out the fridge, and it's still a mess. It's not that I don't *want* to clean the fridge, it's just-

Some things are just hard.

Anyway. I know he's been listening to the tapes, so I guess that'll have to do.

I *think* I still care that he hears my voice. It's hard to tell, sometimes. How much do I *actually* care, and how much is just feeling that I **should** care?

I'm on my own so much these days, I…

Just wish I didn't like it so much.

I mean, if you've got any thoughts, I'd love to hear them.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

Hmm?

[Silence, but for the clock.]

MARTIN

No. Didn't think so. *(long inhale)* That's not what you're here for, is it? *(exhale-sigh)* No. You want this.

[He holds up the statement.]

MARTIN

Fine. *(heavy inhale-exhale)* Fine. Have it your way.

[He sounds resigned, like he was hoping for some insight during this 'conversation' that never came.]

MARTIN

As usual. *(pause)* Martin Blackwood, assistant to Peter Lukas, Head of the Magnus Institute, recording statement #0090401. Statement of Adelard Dekker, taken from a letter to Gertrude Robinson, dated

4th of January, 2009.

Statement begins.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

(inhale) Gertrude. I wanted your opinion on an encounter I've had described to me, and given your recent dealing with Viscera, I would very much value your input.

Good job on that, by the way. I'm sure the gnostic temple was a great loss culturally speaking, but I can't help but admire your directness when it comes to this sort of thing. I often find myself locked in a sense of esoteric paralysis on how to proceed.

Still. God grant me clarity to act when I need it.

Anyway, I was following up on a young man who had apparently had a nasty experience whilst exploring the ruins of the Bright Lake amusement park in Colorado.

You will forgive me if I withhold his name, as I have all the verification I need to be sure he's telling the truth, and I find it hard to believe any followup you would be interested in doing would be beneficial for him. He's earned his anonymity.

Bright Lake lies to the north of White River National Forest, just off the I-70. It was built in the sixties, around a large artificial lake that was apparently formed following a mining accident that had collapsed a significant portion of the surrounding landscape.

It was, from what I can tell from a collection of photos taken in 1983, a largely unremarkable amusement park. A medium sized wooden roller coaster, a ferris wheel, a Hall of Mirrors, and a wide avenue of games and carnival booths, as well as a fleet of paddle boats that allowed you to go out into the lake that gave the place its name.

By the nineties, it was struggling. By the turn of the millenium, it was out of business, closing its gates for the last time in October 1999.

From what I understand, there have been several plans to rebuild it or repurpose the land in the decades since, but none have amounted to more than surveyors pocketing fees and many slabs of planning documentation tucked away in filing cabinets.

It's a little too out-of-the-way to be a common destination for teenage delinquency, but has become, I'm told, quite popular with what can be described as 'rural urban exploration groups.'

Apparently, the lack of, well, actual urban areas to explore means that locations such as this become quite a draw for those in the area with an interest in abandoned places. And of course, its rather forbidding appearance after ten years of decay has led quite a few ghost hunters out that way, as well, though I'm not aware of any specific tragedies or stories about it that would give them much to go on.

My young friend was specifically intending to use it as the site of a

party they were planning to throw. Based on his description, I would have called it a rave… but when I said so, he looked at me like I didn't understand what he was talking about.

In any case, there was going to be a lot of dancing and movement, so he decided to scout ahead in order to see how structurally sound the place still was.

He was planning to mark out those buildings and areas that should be avoided, and which should be sufficiently stable to support a crowd of intoxicated party-goers.

I pressed him on how scary it had been, what fear he might have felt approaching it, but whilst he'd admit it was "creepy as hell," that was apparently the point, and he said he didn't feel any apprehension when he got there.

I suspect his machismo is stopping him admitting it, but there wasn't much I could do to get him to open up.

He was very interested in the Hall of Mirrors. According to him, if it was still in good shape, it would have been an amazing place to put on a light show, and have his guests dance their way through the maze.

Sounds like a good way to get injured to me, but apparently I used the word 'rave' wrong, so what do I know?

Anyway, that was his first stop after checking that the wooden floor of the main avenue was still solid, which it was, and that the central

square would be able to take the weight of the heavy speakers, which it could. Then, he headed to the Hall of Mirrors.

A lot of the actual mirrors themselves were cracked or broken, making the maze part of the funhouse easy to navigate, but he reckoned if he took the time to sweep up the broken glass, it would still be serviceable.

Then he came to a long, straight room that contained the warped mirrors. Now, to you and I, the undamaged pristine state of these would have a warning sign. The fact that there was no dust on them at *all*, even after ten years of neglect, would have rang all sorts of alarm bells.

But I'm trying to remind myself that not everyone is as attuned to these signs as we are, and to my young trespasser friend, apparently there was nothing in that to worry him at *all*. In fact, he was *excited* to see them in such a good shape.

I feel a little guilty. I actually laughed when he said that.

It was the third mirror that did it. The one that expanded him into a short, squat reflection caused no problems. Neither did the one that bent him out of shape. But the third mirror, the one that squeezed him, made him thin and gaunt, that was the one which took him.

He outright refused to tell me how exactly he was pulled through it, but from the look in his eyes I have no doubt it was a powerfully unpleasant experience, so much so, that he claims to have lost consciousness.

He awoke to bright lights, and the sound of machines whirring, cut through with ringing bells and the sound of people shouting. The lights in the Hall of Mirrors were on, and it was clear that he was no longer in the old amusement park, seeing the place was changed from how he recalled it in the dark.

Everything seemed more or less maintained, with paint that was old and starting to peel, but a long way from the bare, rotten wood it had been before. The only thing in *worse* condition were the mirrors themselves, the frames of which were now pocked with tiny, irregular indentations all the way round.

It would be some time before the idea would come to him that they were teeth marks.

Our witness staggered to his feet and quietly made his way towards the door of the funhouse, hanging off the side, so as to look out without being seen.

The park was completely changed, now seemingly full of life. There were people striding down the main avenue, past the well-lit booths trying to entice them with coconut throws and hoop games. The rollercoaster rattled along in the background, the faint screams of its riders drifting over the crowds below. For a few seconds it seemed almost legitimately joyful.

But as he watched, a certain wrongness began to become clear. Meaningless details, if they were confined to a single punter, but all the park-goers seemed the same.

The first was how baggy their clothes were. It almost seemed as though everyone was wearing some sort of oversized novelty tshirt. But it was the same with the shirts, jackets, dresses- until it became apparent that it was not the clothes that were too big, but the wearers who were too small.

Their limbs were painfully thin to look at, their flesh stretched tightly over jutting bones, and the fabric hung off them like great flaps of skin. The hair on each head was thin, almost wispy, often missing in great chunks, and their eyes were sunken so hollow that from a distance they seemed empty.

This is when our unfortunate interloper began to feel the first stirrings of fear.

He began to move, slowly and quietly, outside, his utter bafflement at what was happening briefly overpowering his mounting dread. It wasn't just a few of them. Everyone in the park was so emaciated that they barely seemed human- but they seemed to be acting normally, at least for the moment.

He moved slowly through the shadows of the rickety wooden structures, watching them pass, until his eyes fell upon the coconut shy.

'WIN BREAD,' the sign announced in bold colors, but a huge black cross had been struck through it, and from this distance the prize bucket seemed empty.

Even so, a woman stood there, hurling a well-worn leather ball at

the hairy targets in the back. As she knocked one from its perch, her face contorted into a grimace of joy, and the wizened carnie hobbled over to one of the buckets and handed her a tiny bone.

Without hesitation, she snapped it cleanly in half and started desperately gnawing at the broken end, trying to reach whatever scant marrow might have remained inside.

Our lost young friend felt his stomach turn. He told me he was a good fifteen feet away, but could still hear the sounds of her desperate hunger over the rides all around.

The woman began to examine the bone in her hand closely, then turned and began railing at the carnie, accusing him of cheating her, of lying about the prizes.

This was all too much for our witness, who had decided that whatever was going on in this place, he wanted no part of it. But as he turned to look for a way out, there was a sound that cut through the background din of the park: It was a scream from the roller coaster, but not the joyful cry of adrenaline and mock terror, but a dreadful, piercing wail, flying through the air.

It seemed one of the riders, unable to properly benefit from the safety bar, had been thrown from the height of a loop, and was sailing through the air, landing on the unforgiving ground of the main avenue with a horrendous crunch.

A sudden silence fell over the place. The rides still whirred and rang and jangled, but every person there had gone completely still, their

eyes locked on the mangled mess of broken limbs and shattered bone.

It was the carnie that went first, vaulting over the side of the coconut shy with an unexpected agility. Then it was as if a dam had broken, and every half-wasted figure descended on the twisted corpse. Our interloper had to look away, or risk being sick at the sight of so many spindly bodies swarming, biting, rotten teeth and swollen gums tearing at the still-twitching body of the unfortunate soul from the roller coaster.

When he told me of the hunger he saw in their eyes, his legs were shaking so badly, he had to turn away.

His eyes fell instead on the coconut shy, and he finally got a good look at what were propped up as targets.

What stared back at him certainly had hair, but they most definitely were not coconuts.

He staggered backwards as a shock passed through him, colliding with a nearby trash can and sending it clattering to the floor. He tried to regain his footing, but something underneath him rolled away, and he slipped, falling on top of the heap of bones from the overturned garbage.

They were too large to be animal bones, he was sure of it, and every one of them had been picked clean and cracked open, the marrow sucked from them to leave nothing but dry, white fragments.

Pulling himself painfully to his feet, he glanced back at the crowd, and saw that several of them on the edge, those that had no hopes of reaching the corpse, had clearly heard the commotion, and were starting to walk warily towards him.

He tells me he was suddenly very aware of just how much flesh was on his body.

He turned, and ran back into the funhouse.

I do envy you your gifts sometimes, Gertrude. His account of their pursuit through the mirror-maze was honestly so disjoint that I was unable to follow it. Even after he tried to take me through it two, or even three times.

Without the Eye's clarifying influence, panic can make details… difficult to remember.

They shouted at him, certainly, but his stark terror appears to have robbed him of the memory of their words.

Judging by the bite marks on his wrist, I think it's safe to assume that one of them caught him, at least for a moment, but he claims he can remember nothing of the sort.

I can at least say for certain that he managed to lose his pursuers long enough to return to the warped mirrors. He then took what I consider to be his *only* sensible action in the entire affair: Rather than running straight to the mirror which distorted him into a thin, angular figure, he took a moment to look into each one, and one of

them showed no reflection at all.

His next action of running full-pelt into it was perhaps less inspired, but it does seem to have been effective, since when he regained consciousness, covered in blood and broken glass, he was once again in the silent darkness of the abandoned Bright Lake amusement park he had made the unwise decision to break into.

I don't believe the party ever happened, which is almost certainly for the best.

So? What are your thoughts. I'm keen to hear your own interpretation of this one. My first assumption would have been the Flesh, based on the cannibalism and strangeness of the bodies involved, but- something about this idea of some sort of famine world, its location within a man-made ruin, the whole… societal aspect of it- I'd be inclined to chalk this up as a genuine Extinction manifestation.

But I don't know. Am I drawing wild conclusions, trying to fit the account into my own preconceptions? Keen to know your feelings on the matter.

Oh. One more thing: If you do try to follow up with my source- and I *know* you have your own ways of finding him, should you wish- please be careful.

He told me, near the end, that he had recently been worried he's being followed. He keeps catching glimpses of a thin figure in the distance, or disappearing around a corner, and I can't quite get past

the detail that there was no reflection at *all* in the mirror he used to return.

If my suspicions are correct, there's little either of us can do for him- but do take care, if you make contact.

MARTIN

Statement ends.

[He flips the paper over, sighs.]

MARTIN

Another day, another Extinction scare. The more things change, I guess.

[He sighs again, longer this time. When he picks back up, a familiar squeaky static begins to fade in, quickly.]

MARTIN

I just wish Peter would finally get round to telling me what we're going to do about it.

PETER

Then I have good news for you!

[Martin sucks in a hard breath, and we hear what sounds like

his chair scraping backwards in alarm.]

MARTIN

(admonishing, annoyed) Peter, we have ***talked*** about this!

PETER

In my defense, it is still quite funny.

[Martin takes an annoyed breath to keep his cool.]

MARTIN

So. What's the news?

PETER

I think we're finally ready!

MARTIN

(through gritted teeth) ***Great.*** Does that mean I finally get to know what we're ready **for**?

PETER

Yes! Well- for the most part. To a certain degree, you really need to see it for yourself.

MARTIN

Peter.

PETER

You know the tunnels under the Institute?

MARTIN

Y- Yes, I remember.

PETER

Well, there's something at the center, a- let's call it a device. Now, our biggest problem with the Extinction is a lack of information. We know it's emerging, but we don't know how, or where.

MARTIN

And this… *de…vice* will help?

PETER

Yes.

MARTIN

And I'm going to be the one to use it for you.

PETER

I *very* much hope so. *(brief pause)* If you need more time…

MARTIN

I don't.

PETER

Good, because I was going to say there probably isn't any.

MARTIN

If it's been down there all this time, how come we haven't found it? John explored the tunnels pretty thoroughly, and Leitner was down there a **lot**.

PETER

It's *very* difficult to reach if you don't know *exactly* where you're going.

MARTIN

And you do?

PETER

I will. By tomorrow, I should have my hands on a map, and then- we go.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

(more subdued) Right. *(beat)* Will I be coming back?

PETER

You're not going to *die,* if that's what you're asking, but- no. If all goes well, you won't be.

[Martin takes a long inhale, then exhales.]

PETER

How does that make you feel?

[The static in the background adopts a bit more bass than usual, and the high-pitched scream-like tones increase in volume as well.]

MARTIN

Nothing. *(short laugh)* Nothing at all.

PETER

Excellent. I'm so proud of you, Martin.

MARTIN

I really don't care.

PETER

Perfect.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG157 - Rotten Core

Statement #0131408

[CLICK]

[A RECORDING OF THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN MARTIN AND PETER FROM MAG156 PLAYS. PETER'S DISTINCTIVE STATIC IS IN THE RECORDING AS WELL, VERY FAINTLY. THE ARCHIVIST'S AGITATED BREATHING CAN BE HEARD IN THE BACKGROUND.]

MARTIN

Will I be coming back?

PETER

You're not going to *die,* if that's what you're asking, but – no. If all goes well, you won't be.

[MARTIN TAKES A LONG INHALE, THEN EXHALES.]

PETER

How does that make you feel?

MARTIN

Nothing. *(short laugh)* Nothing at all.

PETER

Excellent. I'm so proud of you, Martin.

MARTIN

I really don't care.

PETER

Perfect.

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

(exhale) This tape was left on my desk. I don't know by who, but to my mind, there are three options. Martin has left it here to let me know that whatever the situation is with Peter Lukas, it is entering its final act, and he needs my help. Alternatively, Peter may have left here to… goad me into action? Or just to gloat, to highlight my helplessness at everything. *(sigh)* Or Annabelle Cane is trying to manipulate me into thinking it's one of the other scenarios. Previously, the spiders have made their presence clear when they've sent me… *hints*… but I can't take that for granted.

I don't know what to do.

There's a statement with it. It looks pretty recent. *(hm)* First time in

a while I've been… wary of reading one.

Still, I guess… *(deep breath)*

Statement of Adelard Dekker, regarding a potential pandemic originating in the town of Klanxbüll, Germany. Original statement given 14th August, 2013. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

You must forgive me, Gertrude, for any typing and spelling errors that might be in this message. My hands are shaking quite badly and my fingers… aren't what they were. Even so, just knowing where this is going, this statement… I can feel the Eye's power on me, be it ever so slight. Steadying me. Helping the words flow.

[A FAINT, DISTORTED BUZZING SOUND RISES IN THE BACKGROUND.]

Is it strange that here, now, that seems almost a comfort? This is the last time you will hear from me. You must trust me on that and not come looking. Not that you would – I know you're too smart for sentimentality, especially after what I have to tell you – but I feel it worth saying nonetheless. Perhaps I'm simply prevaricating. Trying to cling on to a few more precious minutes of life. But that's not me. I know what awaits me, and must have no hesitation in going to my

reward. I know you've never had much patience for my faith, but perhaps it will provide you some small peace knowing I face my death gladly, knowing I have done my duty before God.

I have spoken to you before of Christabel, my contact within the ECDC. She had a run-in with the Crawling Rot some decades ago and has since then kept me up to date with any incidents they have encountered which display… *unusual* properties. Well, she alerted me to what was internally believed to be a potential pandemic originating in the small town of Klanxbüll on the German-Danish border. From what I understand, it was a perfectly pleasant small town, remarkable mainly for a rail line running out to a large island off the mainland.

But as it was, it had been completely quarantined. Christabel reported that the disease seemed to be artificial or man-made in origin, and her colleagues were keen to label it as a bioweapon, but its behavior didn't follow any normal patterns or vectors. Combined with its extremely disturbing symptoms, which caused the skin and muscles to become loose and malleable until they sloughed completely off the body, leaving only a skeleton and organs… well, she was certain that it was the product of an otherworldly evil, and called me.

I've spoken before about how keenly I've watched news of possible pandemics, which is where I suspect the Extinction may pull away from the Corruption during its emergence. This, alongside the possibility of the disease being man-made – though I am certain no human had anything to do with it – well, it was more than enough

to draw me in.

I had no interest in compromising Christabel's position, so I made my own preparations for entry, borrowing a hazmat suit from one of the tents erected around the perimeter. I always despised trying to move in those things, but it seems they've made some real improvements in them over the last fifteen years, so I was able to stay relatively quiet as I talked my way past the cordon and headed into infected Klanxbüll. I'm certainly glad this happened south of the border with Denmark, as my German is passable compared to my non-existent Danish.

Once inside the town, it became rapidly apparent how bad the situation truly was. You and I, Gertrude, have seen more visions of hell than anyone has a right to while living, but this was something else entirely.

Thin trails of blood and skin crisscrossed to the streets, and the walls and windows of nearby buildings were coated in a fine sheen of discarded gore. It didn't take me long to find my first victim, wrapped around a lamppost. He had clearly tried to lean on it for support in his distress, but his flesh had begun to spread and fuse over it in thick, ropey tendrils. His bones were almost bare to the elements.

But it was then that I saw the thing that, to my mind, is perhaps the worst of it. His heart was exposed. It was beating fast, so fast, despite the awful green decay that seemed to be eating at it. I knew at that moment there was nothing that could be done to save the

town. But I could, perhaps, identify the cause.

And identify it I did. I began by checking houses, looking for anything that might have been an unusual artefact or one of those dreadful books. Few doors were locked and many seemed to be swinging open in the breeze that I was deeply thankful I could not smell. Still, for all the quaint homes with their slanted roofs that I combed through, I found nothing that might qualify as an origin for the small town's gruesome demise. But neither did I find many other victims. There were a few: a woman melted into her now crimson bed; an old man whose bright eyes still stared out of his skull, watching the television, though the rest of him lay pooled on the floor. And in all of them, the frantic beating of their decomposing hearts.

The state of these homes, however, would seem to indicate that many had begun to develop symptoms while still inside. Countertops in otherwise empty houses would be coated with blood; wooden floorboards peppered with flecks of gristle. Yet of these individuals, there seemed to be no obvious sign except a line of viscera leading towards the front door.

It was then I realized that I had been following the trails entirely the wrong way. They were not people returning home to die. The sick were pulling themselves out of their houses, crawling, dragging themselves towards some other place, leaving bits behind on the rough pavement as they did so. So I began to walk, slowly, both because of my bulky suit and the rising sense of dread in my stomach. I wonder, Gertrude, whether you are truly as fearless as

you seem, or if you are simply a master of disguising your terror. I suppose I'll never have a chance to find out. I rather hope it was the former. However much I disagree with some of your methods, it feels good to believe there are people in this world who can stare down the Devil without flinching.

I found the source of this sickness in the *parkplatz* opposite the train station. The cars had been pushed to the side, clearly at great cost to the bodies of those that pushed them, and in the center was a figure from whom the rot clearly flowed.

He was sat upon a most dreadful throne, formed from a dozen, two dozen bodies mixed together like putty. Eyes staring out like horror-stricken stars twinkling in the night, and their hearts beating for all to see. A moaning came from that awful seat: voices trying to scream through things that weren't their throat. And it is a sound I shall be glad to leave behind me when I go to my rest.

I will confess to being perversely disappointed when I saw the figure sat upon it – no pale spectre in a lab coat, or twisted golem of petri dishes and test tubes. No, he was lanky, wearing an ill-fitting brown suit and a smile. I'd never previously had the misfortune to meet him, but I knew the description well enough to recognize John Amherst. So it seemed it was not the Extinction, as I had anticipated, but simply a new and awful strain of Corruption.

Still, it was not something I felt I could leave to run its course unopposed. At first I was struck almost with despair, having nothing to hand with which I might attempt a confrontation with this

creature, but upon retreating some ways and considering my options, I realized I actually had almost the exact resources to hand that I might need. A few minutes spent scouting the surrounding streets even revealed a small construction site almost precisely suited to my requirements. I returned to the cordon and took what I needed: a stretcher, as many quarantine sleeves as I could carry, and a syringe. The medical staff appeared to have retreated to the large tent that served as their base of operations, and if anyone noticed me, they didn't interfere. I loaded the gear into a wheelbarrow I had taken from the building site along with a thick metal chain, and began to head back towards the *parkplatz,* stopping only to fill the syringe from a can of garden pesticide I had noticed during my earlier sweep of the houses.

Finally, I revealed myself. He approached me coyly, clearly believing me to be a foolish or lost ECDC medic. Perhaps he assumed I was frozen in terror at the sight of his work, and luckily my hazmat suit did much to hide my expression. He walked up to me with a smile so wide it tore the edges of his mouth, leaking a sick green liquid from the edges, and reached a hand out for my mask.

It was then I gripped his hand and plunged the syringe into his spongy flesh, and pumped him full of the chemical cocktail. He staggered back, ripping the needle from my hand, and fell to the floor, shaking.

I had no illusions of poison being sufficient to destroy an avatar of Filth, though from what I knew of his affinity to insects, I hoped it

would be at least temporarily effective. Regardless, I had to work fast. I dragged him to the stretcher and strapped him down, wrestling against his thrashing spasms. Even through the hazmat suit I could feel the diseased heat of his skin.

I wrapped him around with the chain, which would, I hoped, hold him fast, as I pulled the plastic over the stretcher in layer after layer until I could barely see him through the thick clouded material. I hadn't brought any of the supports with me, so in the end, it looked less like the well-constructed tube of a quarantine stretcher, and more like a lumpy vinyl sack. Still, it was sealed, and that was enough for my purposes. I dragged the thing over to the building site and, with the last of my strength, threw him into the hole that had been left.

By this point, the concrete truck I'd turned on earlier had been mixing for some time, and it was a simple matter to open the pump and pour the contents of its hopper down on top of him. How much he had recovered by this time, I couldn't say for sure, but… he certainly moved around plenty as that thick gray sludge began to cover him.

I can't deny some pride in my solution, Gertrude. In all our discussions of how to contain a being that we could not destroy, I'm not sure we ever hit on a method quite so neat. I am no builder, but by the end I think you would have been hard-pressed to criticize how well that concrete had been laid, and Amherst four feet beneath it.

And now, the part of my tale you must have anticipated from the beginning. During the altercation, the adrenaline had kept me from noticing the tear that Amherst had made in my hazmat suit while I wrestled him onto the stretcher, but as I sat to savor my victory, it became clear that a great cut on my leg had gone clean through the material. There was no way that I was not infected, and indeed over these last few hours, I have felt the sickness working on me. My pace is sluggish and I can feel my skin begin to loosen. My heart is beating so fast it shakes my whole body.

But I shall not wait for it to putrefy as the rot overtakes me. I have dragged those other afflicted I could find into the *parkplatz,* laid them at the feet of that appalling throne, and taken the last gift of that generous construction site: a dozen cans of petrol. I will sit upon that seat and release these poor souls from their suffering, and hopefully make things simpler for the ECDC cleanup crews.

But it did not seem quite right to leave without letting you know what happened, and Herr Becker was kind enough to succumb to the sickness without signing out of his computer. So.

Perhaps you were right about the Extinction. I've been hunting it for decades now, and while I have seen evidence of its influence in other powers, I have never found anything to genuinely prove its emergence as a true power of its own. Perhaps it is an existential fear that flows through the others like a vein of ore, or perhaps the birth of such things is longer and more complicated than I believed. For all that, though, I cannot regret at the time I have spent seeking it. I have done my duty, and none may ask more of me. I am proud

of the work we have done, and it has been an honor to do it alongside you.

Goodbye, Gertrude. May you find your rest where no shadows are cast, and no eyes may see you slumber.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

This, uh… this changes things. I – I think. if Martin found this, read it already, then perhaps he's having second thoughts about – about Peter and the Extinction. This – this could be a cry for help, his way of asking me to follow him without Peter knowing, or… *(sigh)* or what? I don't understand. Martin's been quite clear he doesn't want my help. Am I just hearing what I want to hear? I *need* a second opinion, but… Basira and Daisy are… *out*… somewhere. they left in a hurry and didn't tell me why, now their phones are going to voicemail. Maybe they're just on the Underground, and probably – that doesn't help me now.

I need someone I can trust.

[THE ARCHIVIST SIGHS HEAVILY.]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

GEORGIE

No, John, you've done enough!

ARCHIVIST

I just need to talk to –

GEORGIE

What don't you understand? She *mutilated* herself to get out of that place, and there is absolutely *no way* I'm letting you involve her again.

ARCHIVIST

Look, is she here or not? She – she said she was staying with you.

GEORGIE

Yes, she's here.

ARCHIVIST

Really? Where's all her stuff?

GEORGIE

Bedroom. Why?

ARCHIVIST

No, I just…

[TELLTALE STATIC CRACKLING OF THE EYE SOUNDS AS JOHN FITS THE PIECES TOGETHER.]

Oh. Oh I'm sorry, I didn't – I didn't realize you were to-together.

GEORGIE

That's 'cause it's none of your business. Now *leave*.

ARCHIVIST

Please, Georgie, it's not – I just need to know I'm not overreacting to something. I need an outside perspective.

GEORGIE

Sure, well, here's one. *Get out of my flat.*

[JOHN'S RESPONSE IS CUT OFF BY A DOOR OPENING.]

MELANIE

(softly) Oh – what's go… what's going on? You – you woke the Admiral.

GEORGIE

(reassuring) Hey, hey, easy. It's – it's all right, he was just leaving.

ARCHIVIST

Melanie, I…

MELANIE

(surprised) John?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. It's me.

GEORGIE

It's all right, Melanie.

[THE ADMIRAL CAN BE HEARD PURRING SOFTLY IN THE BACKGROUND.]

John, leave.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, I just… it's Martin.

MELANIE

John… don't. Please.

ARCHIVIST

No, you're right, I'm sorry. You alright?

MELANIE

Yes. I'm… I'm actually doing okay.

ARCHIVIST

That's good.

MELANIE

(wry laughter) My therapist isn't happy about it, you know. Unsurprisingly. Tried to have me put away, but they, um… they let me come here. It's – it's been good for me though I feel alright. I'm – I'm not scared anymore.

GEORGIE

Melanie, you don't have to do this.

MELANIE

It's – it's okay. He's welcome… as a friend. But that's it.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

MELANIE

But you're not after a friend, are you, John?

ARCHIVIST

(desperately) I need an ally.

MELANIE

Then I can't help you.

ARCHIVIST

…I suppose not.

[THE ADMIRAL MEOWS.]

GEORGIE

Okay. You're done?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. *(sighs deeply)* Yeah, I am.

GEORGIE

Come on, Melanie. Let's get you back to bed.

ARCHIVIST

Look after yourself. Both of you.

MELANIE

You too. Good luck, I guess.

[DOOR SWINGS SHUT]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[HEAVY KNOCKING ON A DOOR. IT SWINGS OPEN.]

ARCHIVIST

Helen.

HELEN

Jonathan.

ARCHIVIST

I need – you said before you knew the tunnels, right? That you'd been a… part of them?

HELEN

Not my exact words, but close enough.

ARCHIVIST

I need to know what's in there. What's at the center? *(urgently)* I-it's important, Martin – I need to know.

HELEN

(cheerfully) That's a shame, because I'm afraid I'm not going to tell you!

ARCHIVIST

(aghast) What? Why not?

HELEN

Because I have a good enough sense of what's going on to know that it will be *much* more fun without my involvement! *(begins laughing)*

ARCHIVIST

What? You – you said you were going to help!

HELEN

I am.

ARCHIVIST

I don't have time for this. *What is at the cen–*

[A SOUND LIKE A BLADE BEING DRAWN AS THE ARCHIVIST BEGINS CHOKING. A SHARP, UNSETTLING TONE BEGINS PLAYING IN THE BACKGROUND.]

HELEN

No. We're not playing your game. Now don't forget how *sharp* I can be, Archivist. Perhaps here, now, you're powerful enough to learn what you want from me, but if you try, I promise you I *will* resist. And only one of us is going to survive the attempt.

[THE BLADE WITHDRAWS.]

ARCHIVIST

(out of breath) Fine. Can you take me there? To the center?

HELEN

I honestly don't know. But I'm not inclined to risk it.

ARCHIVIST

Damn you!

HELEN

Run home, John. Find a victim on the way. Chaos is coming and I think you'd best be ready.

ARCHIVIST

Just tell me what's going on. *Please.*

HELEN

(gleefully) Bad things, Archivist. Really bad things.

[HELEN'S LAUGHS ECHO AS HER DOOR SWINGS SHUT.]

[CLICK]

MAG158 – Panopticon

Statement #0182509–A

[INT. MAGNUS INSTITUTE: THE TUNNELS]

[TAPE CLICKS ON. THE SOUND OF PETER'S STATIC IS AUDIBLE IN THE BACKGROUND ALONG WITH SLOW, HEAVY FOOTSTEPS. MARTIN MAKES AN AGITATED SOUND.]

PETER

(pleasantly) Is everything alright, Martin?

MARTIN

It's fine. Don't particularly like it down here.

PETER

Ah, yes, of course. Hard to trust the doors, I imagine.

MARTIN

(wry chuckle) Yeah, well, everyone else seems to these days, so…

PETER

But she's still the same corridors, I suppose. I'm sure… what was his name… Tim! Tim w–

MARTIN

(interrupting) I would *really*. Rather not talk about it, Peter.

PETER

Very well. This way.

[A FEW SECONDS OF SILENCE AND FOOTSTEPS.]

MARTIN

Are you *sure* about that map? I'm pretty certain the tunnels change.

PETER

Oh, don't worry about that. Ink's practically still wet. Not to mention, if they do change, well… I happen to have something that will change them back.

[RUSTLING]

MARTIN

That's a Leitner.

PETER

It is!

MARTIN

And the, um… the blood on it?

PETER

(cheerfully) That's Leitner too!

MARTIN

(apprehensively) …Riiight.

PETER

Do you want to see how it works?

MARTIN

No, no, I'd really rather you didn't –

PETER

No, I insist! Watch.

[A FEW SECONDS OF SILENCE AS NOTHING HAPPENS.]

MARTIN

(wryly sarcastic) Very impressive.

PETER

I'm reading. Shush.

[MORE SILENCE, THEN FAINT FOOTSTEPS.]

MARTIN

Peter. Peter, there's a… Peter, I think there's something in there.

PETER

Mm-hmm. I'd stay quiet if I were you.

[A LOUD, SCRAPING SOUND GROWS IN VOLUME, ALONG WITH AGITATED, INHUMAN NOISES, BEFORE NOT-SASHA ENTERS WITH A DISTORTED SCREAM. IT LETS OUT A FEW RAGGED GASPS.]

NOT-SASHA

So you finally decided to let me out, John? *(calling)* Jooooohn?

Who's there?

[MARTIN'S TERRIFIED BREATHING CAN BE HEARD.]

Who let me out?

Don't be shy… I just want to say thank you.

…alright, have it your way. Now if you'll excuse me… I have some unfinished business.

[IT LETS OUT A CACKLING LAUGH AS ITS VOICE FADES.]

[MARTIN LETS OUT A SHAKY BREATH.]

MARTIN

That – that – that was. Um –

PETER

Yes!

MARTIN

And it's going to –

PETER

Make sure everyone is too busy to follow us. They'll be fine… probably.

You could still go help them. If you insist.

[SEVERAL SECONDS OF SILENCE, MARTIN LETS OUT A RESIGNED INHALE.]

PETER

(satisfied) Very good. Come on.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Gone *how?*

DAISY

Just walked, out as far as we can tell.

BASIRA

A couple of guards on duty vanished too.

ARCHIVIST

(agitated) Vanished. *How?!*

BASIRA

Just left. Best we can tell, he had some dirt on them.

DAISY

Old friend at the prison let us know.

ARCHIVIST

What, and no one thought of that?

BASIRA

Asshole could have left at any time, but he just sat there laughing at us.

ARCHIVIST

No, no, this – this can't be a coincidence.

BASIRA

Coincidence with what?

ARCHIVIST

Martin, or someone, left me a tape. Him and Peter Lukas are looking for something down in the tunnels.

BASIRA

Do you know what?

ARCHIVIST

No. He called it a device.

DAISY

When?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, I don't – I mean… n-now? I guess? They could – it can't be a coincidence that this is when Elias chooses to make a break for it.

BASIRA

You think he's coming here?

ARCHIVIST

You don't?

DAISY

Let's go.

ARCHIVIST

(sighs) I'll get the key.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[MORE CLANGING FOOTSTEPS.]

MARTIN

What is this place?

PETER

The panopticon of Millbank prison. Not quite as Smirke originally conceived it, of course; Jonah Magnus made certain… adjustments.

MARTIN

And it's been down here the whole time?

PETER

Why'd you think this was chosen as the Institute's location when the prison closed? It's a significant site of power for the Beholding. From the tower in the center of this room, you can see everything.

MARTIN

But there's nothing in the cells.

PETER

I don't mean the cells, Martin! I mean *everything*. Come on. Mind your step, this comes from an era before safety rails.

MARTIN

I don't understand. Why are we here?

PETER

It's quite simple, really. I want to use the powers of this place to learn about the Extinction – what it's doing, where it's manifesting. Then we can stop it.

MARTIN

And you need me for this?

PETER

Correct! Without a connection to the Eye, any attempt to use it would likely end very messily indeed. But thankfully it just so happens that you hold such a connection.

MARTIN

So that's it. Both Lonely and Watching.

PETER

You must admit you're the perfect candidate.

MARTIN

I suppose I am.

PETER

There is, of course, just one other complication? You'll have to dispose of the current occupant.

MARTIN

Current…

[MARTIN SEES SOMETHING AND STOPS.]

(tense) Who is that?

PETER

Jonah Magnus! His body at least. Sitting here, watching. Binding it all together, growing ever older. If you want to take his place, well…

MARTIN

I'll need to kill him.

PETER

Yes. Don't worry, though, I brought a knife.

[THE SOUND OF ROLLING, SLIDING STONE.]

MARTIN

(shaky breath) Where are his eyes?

ELIAS

Exactly where they've always been, Martin.

[MARTIN LETS OUT A TREMBLING GASP.]

Watching over *my* Institute.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

BASIRA

And you're sure?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I'm sure it wasn't here before!

BASIRA

It's just that there's a lot of tapes around.

ARCHIVIST

And I don't keep any of them with the *key to the tunnels*. It's been left for me.

DAISY

And it says 'play me'. Kind of suspicious.

BASIRA

So Elias left it.

ARCHIVIST

Or Martin, or Peter, or Annabelle!

BASIRA

Fine. Whatever. Could be a distraction.

ARCHIVIST

Only one way to find out.

BASIRA

We don't have time for this.

DAISY

We don't know that. We've no idea what sort of time frame we're on. I say play it.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[THE SOUND OF SLOSHING LIQUID. A DOOR SWINGS OPEN.]

ELIAS (JONAH)

Gertrude.

GERTRUDE

(under her breath) Damn.

ELIAS (JONAH)

Did you really think I wouldn't notice?

GERTRUDE

I'd rather hoped you'd still be hampered with all the Dark's

business. It's their 'Grand Eclipse' at the moment, isn't it?

ELIAS (JONAH)

But I think we've both come to the same conclusion about *that*. That's why you're here.

GERTRUDE

Yes. Shame, really. I used to be able to torch a building in half the time. Age catches us all. *(contemptuously)* Well, almost all of us, *Elias*.

ELIAS (JONAH)

You were the one so… *insistent* on staying human.

GERTRUDE

And no doubt that makes my death a lot less complicated.

ELIAS (JONAH)

What exactly were you hoping to achieve here? Why not come at me directly instead of burning everything first?

GERTRUDE

I was rather hoping the fire would occupy you while I did just that.

ELIAS (JONAH)

I see.

How long have you known?

GERTRUDE

About your body? Not long after you took your new host and we had our little… chat. It wasn't exactly a huge leap to the panopticon after that. The hard part was figuring out how to actually reach it. Took me the better part of a decade.

ELIAS (JONAH)

So you burn the place down, use it as cover to reach my body, and then we die together. How *poetic*. Doesn't seem like your style at all.

GERTRUDE

I wasn't actually planning on dying.

ELIAS (JONAH)

And how exactly were you planning on achieving that while you're still bound to the… ha. Oh, I see. Very clever. *(amused smirk)* I thought Eric was the only one to figure that little morsel out.

GERTRUDE

Knowledge has a way of surviving. *You* of all people should know that.

ELIAS (JONAH)

Quite. It was a good plan, actually. If you hadn't been so

complacent about me keeping an eye out down here, probably would have worked. *(sarcastic)* Gertrude's grand retirement.

GERTRUDE

It still might.

[SOUND OF FLINT AND STEEL]

Just needs a little spark, and –

[A GUN COCKS.]

I see. So you're finally getting your hands dirty? I must really have caught you off guard.

ELIAS (JONAH)

I suppose we both got a little complacent. Fifty years is a long time. End of an era.

GERTRUDE

I'm not really in the mood for nostalgia, Elias. You might have noticed I'm rather busy so either shoot me or –

[A GUNSHOT RINGS OUT. GERTRUDE GASPS AND COLLAPSES.]

GERTRUDE

(gasping) Well… there it is. Thought it would hurt more.

ELIAS

(sighs) Pity.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

BASIRA

Right, so what does that tell us?

John? John?

ARCHIVIST

Y-yes, sorry, right. Just, uh… uh, the panopticon. It's the, um-

BASIRA

The design of Milbank prison, based on an all-seeing watchtower. I know. I *did* the reading.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

BASIRA

You think that's the device?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. And I'd wager that Elias' body –

BASIRA

Gotta be Jonah Magnus, right?

ARCHIVIST

I'd say so.

BASIRA

(sigh) And he's been body hopping like whatever was in Reynor.

ARCHIVIST

So is he going to help Peter or stop him?

BASIRA

Lukas is planning to take over the panopticon. Can't imagine he wants that to happen.

ARCHIVIST

But Elias put him in charge. That doesn't make any- what… Daisy are you-?

BASIRA

Shh!

[HEAVY, UNEVEN FOOTSTEPS. DISTANT FEMALE SCREAMS CAN BE HEARD.]

ARCHIVIST

Oh, no.

BASIRA

Stay here, both of you. I'll check it out.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

PETER

What are you doing here, Elias?

ELIAS (JONAH)

Oh, you needn't worry.

PETER

Two against one?

ELIAS (JONAH)

I couldn't stop you if I wanted to. I just wanted to be here at the end. Can a man not watch his own death?

MARTIN

What, wh- *what*? What? How are you even *here?*

ELIAS (JONAH)

Well-

PETER

Don't let him distract you.

ELIAS (JONAH)

(contemptuous) Peter.

PETER

(equally contemptuous) Elias.

MARTIN

Both of you just – just shut up. Just give me a second to think.

PETER

Of course. You can take all the time in the world.

ELIAS (JONAH)

Come now, Martin. I would have thought you'd *jump* at the chance

to kill me.

MARTIN

That's not… why wouldn't you help against the Extinction?

ELIAS (JONAH)

Because I'm a busy man. It has never been my top priority.

MARTIN

I don't believe you.

ELIAS (JONAH)

That really doesn't matter, I'm afraid. It's the only answer you're going to get.

MARTIN

If I…

If I do kill you, will the others survive?

PETER

Elias?

ELIAS (JONAH)

Come now, Peter, it's a valid question. And you should have addressed it yourself, really.

The short answer is, *I don't know*, Martin. I guarantee it won't be pleasant for them, but I honestly don't know if their ties to the Institute are quite as strong as I may have implied. You, at least should be insulated from the fallout by your new allegiance. John… *might* be powerful enough to weather it. Melanie's well out of it, so that just leaves Basira and Daisy. And the rest of the Institute, of course, and you can't tell me you care about them.

MARTIN

(indignant) Wh- of course I do!

ELIAS (JONAH)

Do you though? Do you really care about any of them? Or is that worrying just simply an old reflex?

Goodness. Peter has done his work well, hasn't he? No, the only choice I think that matters is whether you want to kill me or not.

MARTIN

I do. *(laughs)* I really, really do.

PETER

Then do it, Martin. We're the same, you and I. We don't need anyone else. watching from a distance, that's always who you've been. Haven't you enjoyed it these last few months, drifting through the Archives unseen, unjudged? You'll like it in there. I promise.

MARTIN

Yeah. Yeah, I think I would.

PETER

Then do it. Kill him and help me *save the world*.

[A LONG PAUSE.]

MARTIN

No.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

DAISY

Well?

BASIRA

Looks like two people. An old guy and-

DAISY

A woman with a scar.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, God, now? Why now?!

BASIRA

It's probably not a coincidence. From what I saw they've been toying with the rest of the Institute, but it won't be long until they're all dead or escaped.

DAISY

And then they're coming here.

ARCHIVIST

(under his breath) Right.

BASIRA

Set up by the door. Try and take them when they break through.

DAISY

Right.

ARCHIVIST

Do I, uh… do I get a gun?

BASIRA

You've fired one?

ARCHIVIST

(indignant) You never *taught* me!

BASIRA

You never asked. Besides, we've got problems enough without –

[A LOUD CRASH.]

NOT-SASHA

Hello, John.

BASIRA

Oh, *shit.*

ARCHIVIST

You've got to be *fucking* kidding –

[LOUD CRASH, GUNSHOTS]

BASIRA

Go!

[CLATTERING SOUNDS AS JOHN RUNS.]

TREVOR

Jooooonny boy! *(cackles)*

JULIA

We want to make a statement!

NOT-SASHA

Oh, hello! What's happening here? New friends?

[GUNSHOTS. NOT-SASHA LAUGHS.]

NOT-SASHA

Not new friends? Even better.

DAISY

What the hell is that thing?

JULIA

Ha! You see that, old man?

TREVOR

Talking. They're all monsters in here.

ARCHIVIST

You remember what happened to Sasha?

BASIRA

That's the thing that took her.

ARCHIVIST

It was trapped in the tunnels. It – Martin. Something's happening down there.

BASIRA

If he's down there with Peter, or Elias… dammit, we need to get down there.

TREVOR

(in the background) Come out, come out, wherever you are!

(sniffs) Can you smell 'em?

JULIA

Ugh. Hard to tell over the stink of *that* thing!

BASIRA

They'll follow us… goddammit. John, go, we'll keep them busy.

ARCHIVIST

What? No! I –

BASIRA

Don't argue. Just go.

NOT-SASHA

Joooon?

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Just don't die.

BASIRA

Go.

[A FEW MOMENTS OF SILENCE AND CLANKING.]

BASIRA

This might be it.

DAISY

Basira…

BASIRA

Didn't think it would end like this. *(heh)* You know what, actually, I think I did.

[JULIA LAUGHS MANIACALLY IN THE BACKGROUND]

DAISY

Basira, promise me something.

BASIRA

What – no. Daisy, no.

DAISY

Basira, when this is over, you need to find me. And kill me. Promise me.

BASIRA

No. No, Daisy, we'll figure something out.

NOT-SASHA

You can't hide forever, John…

DAISY

These last few months… it was always borrowed time, wasn't it? Can't outrun it forever.

BASIRA

(desperately) Daisy…

DAISY

Promise me.

BASIRA

I promise.

DAISY

Thanks. Now run.

BASIRA

Daisy –

DAISY

(voice growling, distorted by the Hunt) ***Run****…*

[QUICK FOOTSTEPS, DAISY SNARLING. JULIA LAUGHS AND COCKS A GUN.] .

JULIA

There you are.

TREVOR

All alone.

DAISY

(snarling) Shit!

[A GUNSHOT RINGS OUT.]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

PETER

Martin. What are you doing?

MARTIN

I'm… saying no. I refuse. Game over.

[THE KNIFE CLATTERS TO THE GROUND.]

PETER

Martin, this is not the time for petulance. There are bigger things at stake here –

MARTIN

(laugh) You know, I think that was actually the problem. You made the stakes too high. All the little details that didn't add up… it made them more obvious. Exaggerated.

PETER

The Extinction *is* coming.

MARTIN

Oh, I'm sure it is! But that's not what this is about, is it? This isn't about saving the world, it's all just some power play against *him*. I might not know exactly what's going on, but I don't think I want any part of this. However much I want to kill him… I'm out.

PETER

But you said –

MARTIN

Honestly, I mostly just said what I thought you wanted to hear.

PETER

I see. *(to Elias)* This is your doing, is it?

ELIAS (JONAH)

Hardly.

MARTIN

It's not him! It's not anybody. It's just me. Always has been. I…

When I first came to you, I thought I had lost everything. John was dead, my mother was dead, the job I had put everything into trapped me into spreading evil and I… I really didn't care what happened to me. I told myself I was trying to protect the others, but… honestly we didn't even *like* each other. Maybe I just thought joining up with you would be a good way to get killed.

And then… John came back, and… and suddenly I had a reason I had to keep your attention on me. Make you feel in control so you didn't take it out on him. And if that meant drifting further away, so what? I'd already grieved for him. And if it meant now saving him, it was worth it.

When you started talking about the Extinction, though… you had me actually, then, for a while. But then – *(laughs sardonically)* then, you tried to make me the hero. Tried to sell me on the idea that I was the only one who could stop it. And that I've never sat right with me. I mean, I mean, look – look at me, I'm not exactly a – a chosen one. But by then I was in too deep. So I played along. Waited to see what your end game was, and here we are.

Funny. Looks like I was right the first time. It's probably still a good way to get killed?

ELIAS (JONAS)

(smugly) I warned you, Peter.

PETER

But you do serve the Lonely.

MARTIN

Oh, I'm getting there, but if this is the final test or something? Then bad luck. The answer's still no.

PETER

(petulantly) No. No! This isn't fair – do you have any idea what you've done? You knew, he must realize –

MARTIN

Jonah had nothing to do with it.

PETER

No, that's not – you can't –

ELIAS (JONAH)

You've lost, Peter, admit it. He played you like a… *(gleefully)* like a… cheap whistle.

PETER

No! Shut up.

ELIAS (JONAH)

Peter. It's time.

PETER

Fine.

MARTIN

Great. Now perhaps one of you, then, can tell me what's…

[PETER'S TELLTALE STATIC FADES IN SUDDENLY, DROWNING OUT MARTIN'S VOICE. WHEN IT FADES OUT, MARTIN IS GONE.]

ELIAS (JONAH)

It won't be that bad, Peter. You'll see. Now, he'll be here soon, so

you can leave or –

PETER

Oh, no. No. I'm not gonna make it easy on him. You haven't won yet.

ELIAS (JONAH)

Your choice. Just make sure to leave the door open.

[PETER'S STATIC RISES ONE LAST TIME, THEN FADES. ELIAS, BY HIMSELF, LETS OUT A LONG, TRIUMPHANT LAUGH.]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[A FEW SECONDS OF JOHN'S LABORED BREATHING]

ELIAS (JONAH)

Ah, John. I was almost worried. You found your way all right?

ARCHIVIST

(out of breath) Yes. Yes, I did.

…how?

ELIAS (JONAH)

Suffice it to say I called you.

ARCHIVIST

What is this place?

ELIAS (JONAH)

Hmm. A complicated question. And time is as –

ARCHIVIST

The panopticon.

ELIAS (JONAH)

(pleased) …*my,* you have grown. Yes. A masterpiece, isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. It is. And that's you there? Your… body?

ELIAS (JONAH)

Not anymore. But not really, although if you harmed it, it wouldn't go well for me. Or any of your friends, for that matter.

ARCHIVIST

Maybe it's worth it.

ELIAS (JONAH)

Maybe. And I'm sure in another circumstance, you would be more than happy to take your chances for a shot at revenge.

But…

ELIAS (JONAH)

But for Martin, time is very much of the essence.

ARCHIVIST

Where is he?

ELIAS (JONAH)

Peter Lukas has cast him into the Lonely, and with every passing moment he gets further away from you.

ARCHIVIST

How do I bring him back?

ELIAS (JONAH)

From out here? Impossible.

ARCHIVIST

You want me to follow him?

ELIAS (JONAH)

No, John. *You* want you to follow him. I simply want you to know that if you do so, you are almost certainly not coming back. To go

into the Lonely willingly is as good as death.

[THERE IS NO HESITATION.]

ARCHIVIST

How do I do it?

ELIAS (JONAH)

Wasn't too long ago. And I'm sure traces of their passage still remain. Just open your mind. Drink it all in. Know their route, and simply… follow it.

[THE STATIC ONCE AGAIN RISES.]

Very good.

Are you scared, John?

ARCHIVIST

(quietly) Yes.

ELIAS (JONAH)

Perfect.

[WITH THAT, THE STATIC OVERTAKES HIM.]

[CLICK]

MAG159 – The Last

Statement #0182509–B

[CLICK]

[OCEAN WAVES AND STATIC; FOOTSTEPS ON WET SAND]

ARCHIVIST

Martin!

Martin!

[STATICKY SOARING SOUND, LIKE A PLANE OVERHEAD]

PETER

(soft, distorted) He doesn't want to see you.

ARCHIVIST

Where are you?

PETER

(distorted) I'm not here, Archivist. No one is.

PETER'S ECHO

No one is.

PETER

It's only you.

PETER'S ECHO

It's only you.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Then maybe *no one* can answer some questions.

[PETER'S VOICE CONTINUES TO ECHO; HE PAUSES AFTER EACH SENTENCE, ALLOWING IT TO REPEAT ITSELF, BEFORE MOVING ON TO THE NEXT.]

PETER

You've still got time, Archivist. Turn around and leave. You've played your part. Now go.

ARCHIVIST

What's wrong, Lukas? Afraid of talking face-to-face?

PETER

(chuckles) Of course. Or haven't you been paying attention?

[THE ARCHIVIST MAKES AN AGITATED SOUND. FOOTSTEPS

CONTINUE.]

ARCHIVIST

Martin!

PETER

It's odd, really. You each think you're so focused on the other, but how much do you *really* know each other? How much time have you spent together when not working, or bickering, or fleeing from that latest thing that wants to kill you?

So. What are you seeking? The image you've each created of the other?

The people you think you love don't exist. Not really. And that's a very lonely place to be.

ARCHIVIST

(cutting off Peter's echo) Shut up!

Martin!

PETER

(smugly) He doesn't… want… to see you.

ARCHIVIST

Then let me hear that from him.

PETER

Just go.

ARCHIVIST

Make me.

Unless you can't. The Lonely and the Eye aren't too far apart, are they? Not really. What good's being alone if you don't *know* how alone you truly are?

Which means… well, I think you're worried. You know I'll find him eventually, and you know I can find *you.*

[SEVERAL SECONDS OF SILENCE]

Hm. Thought so.

[FOOTSTEPS]

(surprised) Martin!

MARTIN

(quietly, distorted) John?

MARTIN'S ECHO

John?

[MARTIN'S VOICE IS DISTORTED SIMILARLY TO PETER'S, FAINTLY ECHOING IN THE SAME WAY. HE SOUNDS TIRED.]

ARCHIVIST

I – I'm here. I came for you.

MARTIN

Why?

ARCHIVIST

…I thought you might be lost.

MARTIN

Are you real?

ARCHIVIST

Yes! Yes, I-I-I am. Come on, we've got to get out of here.

MARTIN

No. No, I don't think so.

MARTIN'S ECHO

No, I don't think so.

ARCHIVIST

(aghast) Why?

MARTIN

(echoing) This is where I should be. It feels right.

ARCHIVIST

(over Martin's echo) Martin, don't say that.

MARTIN

Nothing hurts here. It's just quiet. Even the *fear* is gentle here.

ARCHIVIST

This isn't right. This isn't *you*.

MARTIN

It is, though.

(wry laugh) I really loved you, you know?

ARCHIVIST

Obviously he's done something. Peter's done something to mess with you–

Damn it! Martin! *Martin!*

PETER

(echoing) I *tried* to tell you. He's gone. He made his choice. And it wasn't you.

ARCHIVIST

It was *for* me, though. I'm the *reason* he… I did this to him as much as you.

PETER

Yes. I suppose you did.

Where are your friends, Archivist?

ARCHIVIST

Tim and Sasha are dead.

PETER

Yes?

ARCHIVIST

Daisy and Basira are… probably dead.

PETER

Because. Of. You.

ARCHIVIST

Georgie and Melanie have left me.

PETER

And?

ARCHIVIST

Martin's gone.

PETER

You're alone, Archivist. The last one standing. I did warn you. I did want you to leave, but… perhaps it would be better if you stayed a while. After all – you can't *hurt* anyone in here.

ARCHIVIST

(seemingly defeated) Yes.

PETER (AS THE ARCHIVIST'S ECHO)

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

(flatly) Or perhaps you could answer some questions.

PETER

(echoing) …what?

[STATIC RISES AND DEEPENS AS THE ARCHIVIST SPEAKS]

ARCHIVIST

I wouldn't try to leave if I were you. I can *see* you now. I can find you wherever you go.

PETER

(echo gone) Fine! It was just a thought. So leave.

ARCHIVIST

Not before I get some answers.

PETER

That's not going to happen.

ARCHIVIST

Tell me your story, Peter Lukas.

[AS THE ARCHIVIST SPEAKS, THE CRACKLING STATIC OF COMPULSION RISES.]

PETER

No!

ARCHIVIST

Tell me.

[PETER LETS OUT A FEW LONG, PAINED GROANS.]

PETER (STATEMENT)

(angrily) Fine!

Fine.

Where do you want to begin? The start? A lonely youth, my gradual path to becoming an only child?

That's the thing, you see, about a family faith. You've got to double down on the believers.

My mother had five children over her life, before my father finally drifted away. She was a Lukas to the core, though not born into the family, while my father, for all he believed himself keen on a "life without obligation," gradually withered away to nothing as she cultivated the space between them.

The house was sprawling. Our bedrooms were kept as far apart as possible, and changed often, as we were cared for by a rotating cast of nannies and tutors.

You know, she's still alive? But I still can't picture my mother's face with any clarity. And I consider that a blessing. I'm not even burdened by hatred for her: she is simply someone who exists, far away from me. It was the sort of childhood that would not be allowed if we didn't have money, but we're an old family with, shall we say, a *(heh)* remarkably *direct* line of inheritance. The sort of family where no social worker would even be allowed on the property.

But for all that, aside from a few oddities of faith, I don't know how different my upbringing was from other scions of aristocracy. *(heh)* From what I understand, severing the connection to your humanity

is a cornerstone of an upper-class education… though I was spared the targeted traumas of boarding school, as my mother clearly believed the danger of friendship was too acute.

I suppose to call myself an "only child" is, technically, untrue. Two of my sisters still live, though they disavowed the family and moved far, far away. Still… to be cut off from one's family is its own very special sort of loneliness, isn't it? So we all serve, in our own ways.

The other two – my brother, Aaron, and sister, Judith – well, they weren't considerate enough to quietly grow to adulthood and disappear. They simply didn't have the temperament to thrive in the Lukas household, always trying to… instigate games. Make friends. *(faint disgust) Connect* with people.

As far as I'm aware, they were sent away to live their lives with very distant relatives, never to return. I'm sure it's *possible* my mother resolved the matter in a less-pleasant manner, but in my limited interaction with her, she never struck me as a cruel woman, and I would imagine, for children that age, the fear and isolation of being uprooted and sent away is just as strong as that of meeting a more… *grisly* fate.

I, of course, was the favored son, being quiet and reserved, and, at all points, *deeply* engaged with my own loneliness. I had no time for books or television, or any of the escapes and artificial friendships of fiction. No, I was myself, and that was enough. I would spend my days exploring the wide grounds and forests of our estate, finding the hidden corners *I* thought that none would have found before me

– though now, I wonder how many generations of Lukases had exactly those thoughts, in exactly those spots.

As soon as I was old enough, I would run away for days at a time. I would take what money I needed from my mother's purse, and hitchhike to any city I could reach. Looking back, I realize how odd it was that her purse was always so full of cash, and I believe it may have been the closest thing I ever received to her blessing.

By the time I arrived at whatever destination I had arbitrarily picked, it would usually be night. I would walk around the darkened streets, drinking in the sodium orange, looking at the lit windows of the tower blocks that surrounded me, each one a small, cozy den of warmth and humanity, and *reveling* in my distance from them.

Sometimes, I would pass another late-night traveler on the street, and I would *hate* them. They shattered the distance, my cocoon of quiet stillness, and I wished with all my heart that they would simply disappear.

And one day… one of them did.

I still remember him well. He was tall and broad, wearing a green raincoat he clearly bought before middle age began to set in. There was a thin drizzle that night, one of those rains you can't see, but leaves everything glistening and damp, and he was struggling with an umbrella. I tried to pass him quickly, but his eyes met mine and he… *(disgusted) smiled.* And asked if I could help him.

I can't describe the feeling that passed through me. I can only say that I told him to *go away.* And he did.

Or perhaps… I did. In retrospect, it's hard to be sure which of us fell out of the populated world, but either way, the sense of *blissful* relief, edged with a strange, creeping fear – it was something I'd never experienced before. It was *intoxicating.*

When I returned, I was met by my mother, and a small group of stern-faced relatives that I had never seen before – except at funerals. They took me below the house, and showed me the truth of our family. It was… difficult to accept, at first. Not because I didn't want it to be true, but because it seemed unbelievable that any god could be so perfectly in tune with my heart.

I left the house again shortly after and took to the sea, and never saw my mother again – except, of course, at funerals.

Some of my most peaceful memories were on the *Tundra.* I had gathered a small group of trusted souls who I knew were loyal and dedicated to… my money. They had no qualms or morals about what we did on that boat, and at my request, each signed to the ship under a false name, so I would never have to know who they were. Those lonely nights of sacrifice and waiting, hearing the dreadful sound of my ancestors' whistle drift over the dark and brooding waters, knowing another soul was leaving this world…

God, I wish I was there now. Locked in my cabin, staring over the quiet emptiness of the open ocean.

But it's moored now, and I came on land, at *(angry) Elias's* request. My crew is out there, waiting for a call I think I am now unlikely ever to give them.

I will call him "Elias," for that's how I've known him for most of our… *acquaintance,* though I originally met him when he was still James Wright, Head of the Magnus Institute. I considered him a dull little man at first, so keen to watch other people's *misery,* to *lose* himself in secondhand pain and *drama* – exactly the sort of thing *I'd* always been so keen to avoid.

Gertrude was the one that scared me. She seemed to have no interest in meeting me whatsoever, something I appreciated, but there was something in her eyes when she looked at me. As though she was making a calculation, and I was an unwanted integer she was deciding whether to remove. It wasn't until much later that I realized exactly how true that was. Still, it seems I was never a pressing-enough concern for her to sail out after me – or even wait until I made port and waylay me. I suppose even she couldn't have predicted how it would all turn out.

Thinking about it now, perhaps one of the reasons I lasted as long as I did was that I was, at the end of the day, predictable. A known quantity. I had my little patch, sending my poor, lost sailors to their forsaken end, but I rarely stepped outside of it. When I think of all those I met who traveled in this secret world we found ourselves in – Gertrude, Simon, Mikael, even Rayner – there are plenty whose lives might well have been easier with my death, but it was rare that I strayed outside my habits.

Maybe that's why, when I crossed paths with *(slight disapproval)* Adelard Dekker, we ended up talking and he told me his theory of the Extinction – something that stayed with me even after he died pursuing it.

The thing is, the loneliness I crave, that fills my heart with that reassuring unease, relies on distance from other people. But a world without people at all, or at least anything I would recognize as people…? It is meaningless. Without the lighted window in the distance, how am I to see myself apart from it? No. Such a world would be terribly dull, and scares me in a very different way. A fear I am happy to offer up, of course, but one that I would prefer not come to pass.

My instinct was much like the others: I thought that if I could complete my ritual first, then the potential birth of the dreadful change would be meaningless. I started it shortly before Simon convinced me to join him with his little space experiment. It was interesting, of course, but in the end a tremendous waste of money, just to scare a single astronaut. But I had it in my mind that it might distract from my true attempt.

I had commissioned the services of architects, designers, and sociologists, all under a variety of pretenses, and had secured a plot of land near Aldgate East. I was going to build a tower block of my very own. Oh, it was a *marvel* of design! Deceptively-spacious apartments, yet no room quite big enough for a double bed or decent-sized sofa. Cooking facilities that seemed adequate until you tried to do more than microwave. An office space in every flat, but

without a door, so you could never truly escape your work. None of them had more than a single bedroom – though each had a main bathroom *and* an ensuite, which is a small touch I was very proud of.

The lower four levels were left deliberately empty, so anyone living there could only see the people below from a distance – the lights of the city that they were removed from. The windows were thick, and every wall had soundproofing inside it. The corridors were full of false doors, so even though each floor was designed to minimize the probability of residents encountering each other, it would seem as though they were crowded in by doors that would not open if knocked on. I made the elevators *very* small.

Then, I offered the rooms at a ridiculously low price for their central London location, and then screened the applicants *mercilessly*. I prioritized those who were newly moved to the city: graduates who needed cheap accommodation, and were moving into intense and high-stress jobs that would give them little time for socialising. Recent divorcees were also very suitable, especially those whose friends had sided with their partner. I *crammed* them in, pushing them to stew in a cocktail of distant lights, empty corridors, and lukewarm takeout for one.

The plan was to wait until those inside reached a critical mass of loneliness and despair, then all at once, lock them in remotely. Cut off their internet and phone lines, and leave them to die, alone, in their Single-Occupancy Professional Dooms as the Forsaken emerged from their terror. I called it the Silence – though to be

honest, it was mainly because I thought they had to have names. Can't say if the title was desperately inspired.

(resigned) Then – of course – Gertrude Robinson happened. Do you know how she did it? What devastating weapon she used to derail my plan? The newspaper. She tipped off someone in *The Guardian*.

I still remember seeing the headline, there in black and white: "The Loneliest Building in Britain." Trouble is, everyone I picked was white middle-class, so people actually cared, falling over themselves to declare it "emblematic of the problems of the modern world." *(ugh)* The thinkpieces started to pour in, the applications started to drop off, and I was up to my neck in *(exasperated)* community outreach programs. No way to salvage it. Years of my life and a sizable fortune down the drain. She didn't *even* have the decency to kill me.

It really knocked me back. Took me years to find myself again. I returned to the Tundra, tried to forget – but the trouble was, I'd tasted the game now. I was still hungry for more. I *suppose* that's why I was so keen when Elias contacted me. We'd kept in touch, of course: my family helped fund the Institute, and he'd always been good about tipping me off to potential victims. Going through something horrific can leave you feeling very isolated indeed, especially if you know no one else will believe you.

And of course… he knew I find it hard to resist a wager.

If I could convince one of his staff to willingly pledge themselves to

the Lonely, it was all mine. He even let me pick the victim. He was *so* sure the price of the Institute, the Panopticon and a willing vessel to use it would be just too much for me to resist. And… he was right. Just didn't go quite as I'd hoped.

You know, this is one of the first bets I ever made with him I've actually lost. But I guess that's how hustlers work, isn't it? They lose and lose until you're willing to put it all on the line, and then – the trap shuts.

So I suppose that's probably why I reacted so rashly, trying to rip his victory away. Keep you here. But it looks like I might have underestimated my opponent once again.

ARCHIVIST

What was his prize? What did he get if you lost?

PETER

(disinterested) Oh, he got you.

ARCHIVIST

I-I don't understand.

PETER

And you won't. Not from me.

I'm done.

ARCHIVIST

Tell me.

[THE COMPULSION STARTS UP AGAIN.]

PETER

(pained) I'm… not saying… another… word.

ARCHIVIST

Tell me, or I will **rip it out of you.**

PETER

No…

[THE STATIC GROWS LOUDER.]

ARCHIVIST

Answer my question!

PETER

(echoing again) No! Leave… me… ALONE!

ARCHIVIST

TELL ME!

[THE SQUEALING CRESCENDOS AS THE ARCHIVIST RIPS PETER LUKAS APART. LUKAS LETS OUT A FINAL DEFIANT SCREAM THAT FADES INTO THE REGULAR STATIC.]

ARCHIVIST

(whispered) Stubborn fool.

[A FEW SECONDS PASS, FOOTSTEPS]

Martin. He's gone, Martin. He – he's gone.

MARTIN

(echoing) His only wish was to die alone.

ARCHIVIST

Tough. Now – listen to me, Martin. Listen.

MARTIN

(emptily, echoing) Hello, John.

ARCHIVIST

Listen, I know you *think* you want to be here, I know you think it's safer, and well – well, maybe it is. But we need you. *(desperately) I* need you.

MARTIN

No, you don't. Not really. Everyone's alone, but we all survive.

ARCHIVIST

(cutting off Martin's echo) I don't just want to *survive!*

MARTIN

I'm sorry.

ARCHIVIST

Martin. Martin, look at me. Look at me and tell me what you see.

MARTIN

I see…

[MARTIN'S VOICE QUAVERS.]

I see you, John.

[HE LETS OUT AN INCREDULOUS CHUCKLE, THEN ANOTHER. HIS ECHO GOES AWAY.]

I *see* you.

ARCHIVIST

(relieved) Martin.

[MARTIN'S BREATHING GETS FASTER. HE SOBS, HIS VOICE

BREAKING.]

MARTIN

I… I was on my own. I was all on my own.

ARCHIVIST

Not anymore. Come on. Let's go home.

MARTIN

How?

ARCHIVIST

Don't worry. I know the way.

[THEY BEGIN TO WALK, AND THE TAPE ENDS.]

[CLICK]

MAG160 – The Eye Opens

Statement #0181810

[INT. SCOTLAND, A DAISY TONNER SAFEHOUSE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Knocking sound – seems like it's Martin on the doorframe, or something being unpacked.]

MARTIN

Everything alright?

ARCHIVIST

Just – Making sure it works.

MARTIN

I still don't think we should have brought it.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, it's better than no warning at all. *(small sigh)* Especially if I'm trying not to, uh… See things, you know?

MARTIN

I guess.

[More sounds of either unpacking, or rifling through objects at a leisurely pace.]

MARTIN

You're unpacked then?

[More unpacking sounds.]

ARCHIVIST

(familiar, warm) Hm? *Oh, yes*; much as I can be without any wardrobes to speak of, at least.

MARTIN

(half a laugh in his words) Yeah, it's – it's not exactly the Ritz.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, well, it technically still belongs to Daisy, so – *(small exhale)* I'm just glad it's not some sort of kill room.

MARTIN

Or – *(pause for a huffed laugh)* Or it is, and she just cleaned it up *really* well.

[He chuckles again. The Archivist joins him.]

ARCHIVIST

(small exhale) Yes.

[He makes a small noise.]

MARTIN

Are we? –

[Sound of shuffling papers.]

MARTIN

Are we… safe here?

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) Safe as anywhere. If Elias wanted to find us, I imagine he could, but – I doubt the police will be able to. If nothing else, I'm hoping there'd be some – jurisdiction complications, in Scotland?

[As he speaks, Martin sucks in a breath, as if about to speak, then cuts himself off.]

MARTIN

(that familiar sort of chuckle-scoff) Some– Somehow I don't think *Daisy* will be worried about *jurisdictions*.

ARCHIVIST

I – *(falters)* I don't think she'd come here.

[We hear him open a drawer as he continues.]

ARCHIVIST

Doesn't look like this place has been used for *years*.

MARTIN

And if she does?

ARCHIVIST

(exhale) Well. At least we'll know where she is.

MARTIN

Wh–

[He cuts himself off with a frustrated sound.]

ARCHIVIST

Besides, I'm more worried about the other Hunters. Or the – Sasha thing. Last I heard, they still hadn't found any bodies. *(long inhale)* A lot of destruction, a lot of *blood. (he sighs)* But that's it.

[More object sounds.]

MARTIN

You think they're still out there?

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

Hopefully a *long way* out there. *(soft)* But I think we're okay.

[Long pause.]

ARCHIVIST

(changing-the-subject-voice, inhale) Not much in the way of food, is there?

MARTIN

Oh – Oh, no, not yet. I was actually going to go head down into the village to pick something up?

ARCHIVIST

Hm.

MARTIN

Maybe give Basira a call to check in, because Daisy apparently couldn't pick a safehouse with a signal.

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) I think that's rather the point.

MARTIN

Mm.

ARCHIVIST

(teasing) Anyways, don't tell me the phonebox down there doesn't appeal to your retro aesthetic.

MARTIN

It – might. Maybe.

[He zips up a bag.]

MARTIN

You'll be okay here?

ARCHIVIST

I'll be fine.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. SCOTLAND, A DAISY TONNER SAFEHOUSE, SOME WEEKS LATER]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The air seems hollower here, and Martin's footsteps sound like they're coming upstairs.]

ARCHIVIST

How was she?

MARTIN

Oh, same as last week.

ARCHIVIST

Institute still crawling with police?

MARTIN

I mean, they've finished all the interviews? Apparently they're calling it a "terror attack."

ARCHIVIST

Doesn't surprise me. *(heh)* Appropriate, in a way.

MARTIN

Mm.

ARCHIVIST

(carefully) Does she know who they're looking to blame?

MARTIN

They're not really talking to her about it? Sectioned or not, I guess *ex*-police only gets you so far.

ARCHIVIST

Mm.

Does she know if they've found the old prison yet – the Panopticon, Eli– *(he catches himself, returns to the phrase with a harder edge to his voice) Magnus*'s body.

MARTIN

I don't know how hard they're looking, to be honest?

[A thumping sound, like he's setting his bag down on wood.]

MARTIN

Basira said a few of them got lost in the tunnels for over a day –

[The Archivist snickers in the background.]

MARTIN

– and – it's not like the promise of an old man's corpse is much of a motivator.

ARCHIVIST

Mm.

MARTIN

Still, she did manage to talk them out of burning the whole place to the ground? – and, ooh, actually, that reminds me, um –

[He starts pulling something out of his bag, something that crinkles like paper.]

ARCHIVIST

Ah, these, these are the statements.

MARTIN

Yes. Basira said last week she'd send some up as soon as the Archives weren't a crime scene.

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

And she wasn't sure which ones you've read already, so she, she just said she'd send a bunch.

ARCHIVIST

There – There are tapes in here, as well. D-Did she say anything about tapes?

MARTIN

She didn't mention it? – But I didn't check it until after the call.

ARCHIVIST

Mm.

MARTIN

I assume it's her attempt at a-a, a varied diet? Eating your greens, you know?

ARCHIVIST

(amused) Probably. *(inhale, reassuring)* I'm sure it'll work fine.

MARTIN

Cool.

Well, as *fun* as listening to you monologue is –

ARCHIVIST

Hm.

MARTIN

– I will give you some privacy. Go for a walk.

ARCHIVIST

(exhale) Let me know if you see any good cows.

MARTIN

Obviously I'm going to tell you if I see any good *cows*.

[As he walks away, presumably back down the stairs, the Archivist chuckles quietly and fondly to himself.]

[Then he exhales, and as the door closes, he scrabbles at the statement on the table, getting everything in order.]

ARCHIVIST

Right. Statement of Hazel Rutter regarding a fire in her childhood home. Original statement given August 9th, 1992. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, The Archivist. Statement begins.

[We hear what's either the crackling of paper, or a fire.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Hello, John.

[As soon as he begins speaking, a whizzing static kicks in from the background.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Apologies for the deception, but I wanted to make sure you started reading, so I thought it best not to announce myself.

I'm assuming you're alone; you always did prefer to read your

statements in private. *(slightly strained)* I wouldn't try too hard to stop reading; there's every likelihood you'll just hurt yourself. So just listen.

Now, shall we turn the page and try again?

[The Archivist makes a pained couple of sounds out-of-statement-character, as if he's trying to tear himself away from the statement and physically cannot.]

[When he picks the statement back up, the words sound like they're being torn from his lips.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Statement of Jonah Magnus regarding Jonathan Sims, The Archivist.

Statement begins.

[A slap on the table – or a crack? Spooky.]

I hope you'll forgive me the self-indulgence, but I have worked so very hard for this moment, a culmination of *two centuries* of work. It's rare that you get the chance to monologue through another, and you can't tell me you're not curious.

Why *does* a man seek to destroy the world?

It's a simple enough answer: for immortality and power.

Uninspired, perhaps, but – my god. The discovery, not simply of the dark and horrible reality of the world in which you live, but that you would quite willingly doom that world and confine the billions in it to an eternity of terror and suffering, all to ensure your own happiness, to place yourself beyond pain and death and fear.

It is an awful thing to know about yourself, but the *freedom*, John, the freedom of it all. I have dedicated my life to handing the world to these Dread Powers all for my own gain, and I feel… nothing but satisfaction in that choice.

I am to be a *king* of a ruined world, and I shall never die.

I believe there are far more people in this world that would take that bargain than you would ever guess. And I have beaten all of them.

Of course, this desire did not manifest overnight. When Smirke first gathered our little band – Lukas, Scott, and the rest – to discuss and hypothesize on the nature of the things he had learned from Rayner, I felt what I believe we all felt: curiosity, and fear.

But as he compiled his taxonomy and codified his theories on the grand rituals, I began to develop a very specific concern. Smirke was so obsessed with his ideas on balance, even as our fellows began to experiment and fall to the service of our patrons.

I began to worry that if one of them successfully attempted their ritual, then I would be as much a victim as any, trapped in the nightmare landscape of a twisted world.

At first, I attempted prevention, but the cause seemed hopeless. The only way to ensure *I* did not suffer the tribulations of what I believed to be an inevitable transformation was to bring it about myself. So what began as an experiment soon became a race.

Beyond that, I was getting older, and mortality began to weigh more heavily on my mind. How much in this world is done because we fear death, the last and greatest terror?

I convinced Smirke to work on Millbank, leading him to design it as a temple to all the Fears in equilibrium, such that my own modifications to the design of the Panopticon went… unremarked.

It. Took. Years, for the dread of the prisoners to fully suffuse the place, and I was an old man before I made my first attempt at the Watcher's Crown, sat in the center of that colossal eye, the great ring of cells encircling me like a coronet.

It was… flawed, of course, as all Smirke's rituals were, and none of the inmates survived as the power I attempted to harness shook the building almost to pieces, and the murky swamp upon which the prison was built consumed it.

But it left me a gift: For sat in that watchtower, I could see *everything* I turned my mind to.

It was a dizzying power, and one I discovered I maintained even as I found vessels to extend my life. Of course, I had to make sure the location was kept under my control while I worked on revising my plans, and so I moved the organization I had founded to assist in my

research down to London, and the Institute as you know it was born.

I'll not bore you with details of my bodies and failures through those intervening years. Suffice to say I kept busy, both planning my own next attempt, and doing my best to stymie those others who tried versions of their own.

Surely my interpretation of the Watcher's Crown had been incomplete; there had been some element of the ritual I had overlooked.

It was not until I met Gertrude Robinson that things began to really come into focus.

You see, the role of Archivist has been part of the Beholding for as far back as my research can go. This isn't uncommon for the Powers; most of the beliefs around them are guesswork and fallible human interpretation, but there are certain throughlines and consistencies that can be spotted, regardless of the trappings.

But Gertrude was unlike any other Archivist. She simply did not care about compiling experiences or collecting the fears of others. She was driven to stop those who served the Powers.

More than once I thought she must secretly be of the Hunt – but there was never that sick joy in her, that thrill of predator and prey. She had simply decided that this was her position in life, and went about it with a practicality that even I found disconcerting at times.

I once asked her what drove her, what had started her down that path. She told me the Desolation had killed her cat.

I don't know if she was joking, and, to be honest, I could never bring myself to look into her mind and find out for sure.

In any case, Gertrude's ruthless efficiency in derailing and collapsing rituals threw into stark relief a question that had been bothering me for almost a hundred and fifty years: In the whole span of humanity, why had nobody ever succeeded?

Perhaps there were a long line of Gertrude Robinsons throughout history, but I found that hard to credit. Could it be, then, that there was something in the very concept of the rituals that meant they *couldn't* succeed?

She was clearly having similar thoughts in that last year, all of which culminated with the People's Church.

When I saw that she was making no preparations whatsoever to stop it, I realized she was putting into practice a theory, and one she couldn't afford to be wrong. She was going to wait, and see if the unopposed ritual succeeded, or if it collapsed under its own strain as mine had all those years ago.

Knowing Gertrude, I'm sure she had a backup plan if she had miscalculated – but she had not. The ritual failed. And all at once, I realized what had to be done.

You see, the thing about the Fears is that they can never be truly

separated from each other. When does the fear of sudden violence transition into the fear of hunted prey? When does the mask of the Stranger become the deception of the Spiral?

Even those that seem to exist in direct opposition rely on each other for their definition as much as up relies on down.

To try and create a world with only the Buried makes as much sense as trying to conceive a world with only down.

Every ritual tied itself so closely to a single power as to render itself impossible. They could bring their patron close, but never sever it from the others, and eventually it would be violently pulled back into the place next to reality where they dwell.

The solution, then, is simple: A new ritual must be devised which will bring through *all* the Powers at once. All fourteen, as I had hoped I could complete it before any new powers such as Extinction were able to fully emerge. All under the Eye's auspices, of course. We mustn't forget our roots.

And there was only one being that could possibly serve as a lynchpin for this new ritual: The Archivist. A position that had so recently become vacant, thanks to Gertrude's ill-timed retirement plans.

Because the thing about the Archivist is that – well, it's a bit of a misnomer.

It might, perhaps, be better named: The Archive.

Because you do *not* administer and preserve the records of fear, John. You *are* a record of fear, both in mind as you walk the shuddering record of each statement, and in body as the Powers each leave their mark upon you.

You are a living chronicle of terror.

Perhaps, then, if I could find an Archivist and have each Power mark them, have them confront each one and each in turn instill in them a powerful and acute fear for their life, they could be turned into a conduit for the coming of this – nightmare kingdom.

Do you see where I'm going, John?

It does tickle me, that in this world of would-be occult dynasties and ageless monsters, the Chosen One is simply that – someone I chose. It's not in your blood, or your soul, or your *destiny*. It's just in your own, rotten luck.

[Thunderclaps.]

I'll admit, my options were somewhat limited, but My God, when you came to me already marked by the Web, I knew it had to be you. I even held out some small hope you had been sent by the Spider as some sort of implicit blessing on the whole project, and, do you know what, I think it was.

Of course, I had to bide my time, get a measure of you before I began to push, learn how you worked – So I decided I would wait

until something came for you, and see how you reacted. Attacks upon the Archives were not uncommon during Gertrude's tenure, and, while she was always prepared, I made sure you would not be.

I reasoned if you couldn't survive a single encounter, you were unlikely to make it through all fourteen. So, when Jane Prentiss attacked, I watched eagerly, one hand on the gas release from the start.

You acquitted yourself well enough, so I decided to see how far you would get, though I waited until the worms were in you before I pulled the lever. I needed to make sure you felt that fear *all the way to your bones*.

The discovery that one of the Stranger's minions had infiltrated the Institute in the aftermath was certainly a pleasant bonus. Even if that sliver of paranoia, that vague wrongness you couldn't quite place wouldn't count as a mark, it was only a matter of time before it confronted you in a far more direct and affecting matter.

Admittedly, given the advent of the Unknowing, I needn't have bothered. But what's the old saying about hindsight?

More important to me was Sasha's encounter with the Distortion. If *it* had taken an interest, then I very much wanted it to cross your path.

[Thunder continues as he goes on.]

So I found one of its current victims and convinced her to make a statement.

Poor Helen. I actually had to put her in a taxi myself, she was getting so lost in those narrow London side streets.

It worked, though.

[Something creaks. Another loud snap/crackle.]

Between the stabbing and at least two desperate flights into its doors – you're marked very deeply by the Spiral.

Jurgen Leitner was a surprise, of course, and I was forced to improvise. I had no idea how much Gertrude would have told him, and he could very easily have derailed everything if you learned too much too fast.

I… justified it to myself saying I was going to have to send you out into the world anyway, if you were to encounter more of the Powers, but I can't honestly pretend it wasn't a… rather rash move.

Still. I'd requested Detective Tonner be assigned to the case when they found Gertrude's body in the hope that having a Hunter in the mix would eventually lead to a confrontation, and setting you up as a killer certainly hastened that.

Then it was just a matter of feeding you statements to lead you to a few Avatars I thought were likely to harm you – but probably would stop short of actually killing you.

Jude served her purpose exactly as I had hoped, as did our dearly departed Mr. Crew, marking you for the Desolation and the Vast.

Honestly, I had – nothing to do with Melanie and her *Slaughter* adventure, but when I saw the situation, I made sure to trap her here, so when her rage bubbled over you would be right there, a ready target.

I didn't foresee the mark coming from surgery gone wrong, but it was a very pleasant surprise.

The Unknowing was a distraction, but not an unwelcome one. For this to work, you needed more than just the marks; you needed *power*. And that was something the Unknowing served to test, though it posed no *actual* danger in the grand scheme of things.

And it did serve another purpose, of course. It inadvertently pushed you to confront death, a mark I had been *very* worried about trying to orchestrate. If I tried too early, you'd just *die*. Too late, and you might be powerful enough to see the attempt coming, and maybe even understand *why*.

As it was, it was *just right*, and once again, you came through with *flying colors*.

By this point, your abilities were coming along in leaps and bounds, and I was concerned that meeting face-to-face might end up with you – *(sigh)* – Knowing something you shouldn't.

I had initially planned to go into hiding, but when your colleagues

surprised me with the police, well. It was simple enough to cut a deal.

All that remained, then, were the Dark, the Flesh, the Buried, and the Lonely.

I was a little put out when that *idiot* Jared Hopworth misinterpreted my letters and attacked the Institute too soon, before you were even out of the hospital, but then – Ho, you should have see my face when you voluntarily went to him.

I couldn't see what happened in there, of course, but given how you came out, I'm *very* sure it counts as a mark.

I suspected the coffin might turn up again, and once it did, it was simply a matter of getting any, uh… *restraining factors* you might have had flying off on a wild goose chase, and waiting.

Honestly, Detective Tonner has been proving *invaluable* through this process. I'd been racking my brains for months about what I could use to lure you in.

And, of course, I knew the Dark Sun was just sitting there waiting. So when it came time, I just whipped up another apocalypse and sent you on your merry way.

Then all that remained was the Lonely.

Poor Peter. He really should have left well enough alone. *(cruel laugh)* Or just done what I'd asked in the first place.

Ah well. He knew what I was attempting, and was very unwilling to cooperate until I made him a little wager about Martin.

Of course, he had no way of knowing that, in addition to setting you up for the final mark, he was giving you all the tools you needed to escape from it.

How *is* Martin, by the way? He looks well. You will keep an eye on him when all this is over, won't you? He's earned *that.*

And there, I think, we are brought just about up to date. I have enjoyed our little trip down memory lane, but past here lies only impatience.

You are prepared. You are ready. You are *marked.* The power of the Ceaseless Watcher flows through you, and the time of our victory is here.

Don't worry, John. You'll get used to it here, in the world that we have made.

Now. *(cruel, cruel laugh)* Repeat after me.

[When The Archivist begins to read the incantation, a heavy, dense static returns and begins to build, adding in higher pitches as it does so.]

You who watch and know and understand none. You who listen and hear and will not comprehend. You who wait and wait and drink in all that is not yours by right.

Come to us in your wholeness.

Come to us in your perfection.

Bring all that is fear and all that is terror and all that is the awful dread that crawls and chokes and blinds and falls and twists and leaves and hides and weaves and burns and hunts and rips and bleeds and ***dies****!*

Come to us.

I – OPEN – THE DOOR!

[An explosive sound of breaking glass; the static stays high and heavy and oppressive.]

[TAPE GARBLES AND MAKES A SOUND AKIN TO REWINDING.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. SCOTLAND, A DAISY TONNER SAFEHOUSE, SOME TIME LATER]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

MARTIN

(frantic) Wake up. Wake up. Wait, John, John, **John, WAKE UP!**

[He slaps the Archivist; the Archivist immediately shudders awake with a disoriented yell.]

ARCHIVIST

(dazed) Uh– Wh– *Martin?*

MARTIN

John!

ARCHIVIST

Wha– Wh– *(more lucid)* Oh god. What– What happened?

MARTIN

I, I don't, I don't know; everything– *(close to tears)* It's all gone wrong!

ARCHIVIST

Help me up!

[He grunts as Martin does exactly that, breathing heavy.]

MARTIN

No, no, no – don't, don't go outside. It's– It's *real* bad.

[Silence as the Archivist presumably goes to the window.]

ARCHIVIST

Oh god.

MARTIN

I don't know if it's just *here*, or –

ARCHIVIST

No. *No,* it's everywhere. They're all here now. *(voice shaking – but in awe?)* I can feel *all* of it.

MARTIN

John. John, I'm scared.

ARCHIVIST

The whole world is afraid, Martin. Because of me.

[He seems to be laughing in the background – or it could be crying.]

ARCHIVIST

And The Watcher –

[His voice is *distorted* when he speaks, in a way extremely reminiscent of Michael/Helen and Nikola Orsinov.]

ARCHIVIST

– drinks it all in.

MARTIN

(quietly) John?

ARCHIVIST

(still distorted, with shaking laughter/tears) Look at the sky, Martin. Look at the *sky*. It's looking back.

[And now he does begin to laugh in earnest. It's not a laugh we've heard on him before; not a short, clipped laugh; not a surprise burst of genuine hilarity. This laugh seems afraid, and yet cold. It's reminiscent of Elias's villainous laugh, but is tinged more with fear than satisfaction.]

[He does not stop laughing.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG160.11 – Season 5 Trailer

[INT. SCOTLAND, A DAISY TONNER SAFEHOUSE, POST-WATCHER'S CROWN]

[TAPE CLICKS ON]

[The background has a shimmery quality to it, a haunting set of soft organ-like tones, modulating slowly. It is not harmonious, but it is musical. We hear the occasional screech, though whether human or inanimate is unclear. Still, all of it seems *normal,* whatever that means in this new world. It is not commented upon. It is room tone.]

[The Archivist sighs deeply. He inhales sharply, and a small creak immediately follows.]

[Then he sighs again, and this time, it's more of an exhale.]

ARCHIVIST

What? *(Beat)* What do you want?

[Something creaks.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

The world is –

[Something in the background– wind? A monster?– howls, and the Archivist falters for a moment.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

It's over. You've *won*.

What can you possibly still need to hear?

[His voice dips lower at the end of his sentence. Something creaks, longer this time. The Archivist gasps.]

MARTIN

(knocking) Knock, knock!

ARCHIVIST

Who's there?

[When he speaks, his voice is filled entirely with affection.]

[We hear a couple of footsteps as Martin steps into the room.]

MARTIN

Just me.

ARCHIVIST

(ah, yes) Just me who.

[It's phrased less of a question, and more of an inevitability.]

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

Never mind.

MARTIN

Uh – okay.

How are you feeling today?

[The Archivist inhales deeply.]

ARCHIVIST

Define… "today."

MARTIN

How are you feeling in general, then.

ARCHIVIST

Unchanged. I don't know if it will ever change again.

MARTIN

(trying) I brought you some tea.

ARCHIVIST

(immediate) No, you didn't.

MARTIN

Uh – what? Y,Yes, I did.

[A small nervous chuckle.]

ARCHIVIST

We ran out of tea the day before the change; you said the little shop in the village didn't have any more.

[Brief pause. Something rattles.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

Ergo, *(braced inhale)* that isn't tea.

[Martin begins to splutter and walk closer.]

MARTIN

W,What? No, of course it's tea, I –

[The rattling flares up, louder; hisses, even. Martin breaks off, begins to yell, increased in volume. He drops the teacup or mug. It shatters.]

[We assume the hissing was the tea.]

[The *thing* hisses again, quieter, then fades out with a last rattle, leaving or disappearing.]

[Martin's yelling subsides.]

MARTIN

Wha-What's [bank] – Alright, I, I *made* that! If, if – *(heavy breathing, steadying himself)* I thought you were! –

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, Martin. *(dry laugh, humorless)* Things don't work like that anymore.

MARTIN

(indignant) Like *what?*

ARCHIVIST

Like normal.

[A wailing sound- wind or monster?- from the background.]

ARCHIVIST *(CONT'D)*

This isn't a world where you can trust –

MARTIN

(spluttering) Tea?

ARCHIVIST

Comfort.

[Martin exhales.]

MARTIN

Oh. *(brief pause, quieter)* Yeah. Yeah.

[He exhales, softly, and then there's silence for a moment. Something… *warps* in the background.]

MARTIN

(humorless little exhale) Maybe I should, uh – pop down the village? See if they have any coffee instead?

ARCHIVIST

It's gone, Martin, and the *people* are –

MARTIN

Yes, I know, John; I'm not ignorant, I'm just – I'm just not ready for *complete* despair yet.

ARCHIVIST

Like me.

MARTIN

I didn't *say* that.

ARCHIVIST

You didn't have to.

[Silence. The warping wind is back, in the background, with a few other not-quite-natural not-quite-unearthly sounds layered over it.]

MARTIN

You *know* I'm here for you.

[The Archivist inhales, long and deep, then exhales.]

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

[Clothes rustling. Possibly a hug, at the very least drawing closer to Martin.]

ARCHIVIST

Yes I do.

MARTIN

Alright. Alright.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

MARTIN

You still… *(sigh)* Feeling it, seeing everything?

ARCHIVIST

(nearly a whisper) Yes. I, I'm trying not to, but – all the fear, the anguish, i-it just keeps coming at me in waves, rolling over me, filling my head with such *awful* sights.

MARTIN

I'm sorry. That sounds… *(small sigh)* That sounds horrible.

ARCHIVIST

I wish it was, Martin. I *really* wish it was.

[Something creaks.]

ARCHIVIST

But it feels… right.

[He exhales, a breathy *huh.*]

[Something creaks.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG161 – Dwelling

Statement #########–1

[INT. THE MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, 2015]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Clothes rustle.]

MARTIN

Careful!

TIM

Sh-hh!

[A door opens.]

TIM, SASHA, MARTIN

SURPRISE!

[Someone blows a party horn.]

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Jesus!

TIM

Happy birthday, boss.

SASHA

Happy – Oh, *(laughing, a bit)* are you okay?

ARCHIVIST

No, I! – Christ, one second.

MARTIN

Sorry, sorry; Tim wanted to surprise you, and –

TIM

Snitch.

[Some papers have been rustling in the background over this.]

ARCHIVIST

No, no, it's *fine*, thank you. Just a – shock.

TIM

(duh) Well, that's the idea.

[Someone flips a page. Probably the Archivist.]

ARCHIVIST

Indeed. Though, uh, honestly, the bottle of wine was just fine.

[He pulls out a chair as he talks.]

TIM

Pfft, yeah, as a *decoy*.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, well, thank you. This is very – *(rapid page flipping) elaborate* of you.

SASHA

Plus, it was kind of fun, giving you a heart attack.

ARCHIVIST

Mm, I'm sure. I notice you didn't jump out at *Martin* when he had a birthday.

TIM

(can hear his smile) No, he's *way* too jumpy as it is.

[Martin lets out a sound of singular offense.]

TIM

We were worried he might *damage* himself!

MARTIN

(higher) Hey!

[Clothing sounds, as if he's folding his arms.]

MARTIN

(hmph) Well – I preferred going out for ice cream anyway.

ARCHIVIST

You went for ice cream?

SASHA

Yes, you were there!

MARTIN

You had – rum and raisin, and taught us all about emulsifiers.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Right, yes, *(unconvincing)* I – I remember.

TIM

(smiling) Liar.

ARCHIVIST

Well, thank you anyway. This is all – very touching.

TIM

We just wanted to do something to lighten the mood, you know?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I'm – *(inhale)* aware it's been a – rough start.

[He exhales.]

SASHA

*(*really?*)* That's not what this was about; we just thought you could use a chance to unwind.

ARCHIVIST

(exhale) I.. suppose it couldn't hurt.

[A soft knock on the door.]

JONAH MAGNUS *(AS ELIAS)*

Knock knock.

TIM

Double boss!

SASHA

Elias?

MAGNUS

I'm not too late for cake, am I?

ARCHIVIST

There's a cake?

TIM

How did y– *Martin!* That was a secret!

MARTIN

(high) I didn't say anything!

MAGNUS

He didn't have to. Nothing escapes my notice, and I like to keep an eye out for this sort of thing.

TIM

Well – it's – good to see you.

ARCHIVIST

Yes – Y,yes! Come in?

MAGNUS

So, how old is the birthday boy?

ARCHIVIST

Uh – thirty-eight.

[There's a sound that can be interpreted as Sasha either *tch*-ing or flicking him.]

SASHA

Liar.

[Everyone laughs.]

ARCHIVIST

(petulant) How would *you* know.

TIM

What, does someone need to change their password again?

ARCHIVIST

I – what?

[Tim laughs.]

ARCHIVIST

Sasha, have you been going through my computer –

SASHA

(overlapping, definitely yes) Definitely not; No idea what he's talking about.

TIM

'Course not!

[They both keep laughing in the background.]

ARCHIVIST

(mostly under his breath) That's *really* not appropriate.

[He sighs, unheard.]

MARTIN

Oh, come on, guys!

MAGNUS

Anyways. Somebody mentioned cake.

TIM

Uh, yeah. You did.

MAGNUS

(inhale of mock surprise) Yes, I did, didn't I.

[Tim sighs.]

TIM

Alright, alright. Well, I guess the cat's out of the bag now, anyway, look – just give me a second.

[Someone sighs. Again, probably the Archivist.]

[We hear some ceramic-type sounds as Tim gets out the cake.]

TIM

(singing) Happy birthday –

[Everyone else joins in.]

EVERYONE

– to you.

ARCHIVIST

(dear god this is happening) Oh, okay.

MARTIN

Mhm!

EVERYONE

Happy birthday to you.

ARCHIVIST

Right!

EVERYONE

Happy birth–

ARCHIVIST

(please cease) Yes!

[He sighs. No one listens.]

EVERYONE

day, dear –

TIM, SASHA, MARTIN

– Jo-on.

MAGNUS

(simultaneous) – Archivist.

EVERYONE

Happy birthday to you.

ARCHIVIST

I –

TIM

(overlapping, laughing) Yay!

ARCHIVIST

Alright, yes – thank you. I do hope you're not planning to *light* those candles.

TIM

(who, me?) Oh, goodness.

[He shakes a box of matches.]

TIM

A source of ignition? In the Archives?

[Sasha laughs.]

TIM

Uh-oh.

ARCHIVIST

Tim.

TIM

(overlapping) Mmm.

Oh. Whoops! *(strikes a match)* Sorry. My hand slipped.

[The flame crackles and burns into being.]

TIM

And again –

[A slight crackle as he lights a candle.]

TIM

And again –

[The same crackle.]

TIM

And a couple more times – here, I'm so *clumsy* today; that is a *lot* of fire.

[The candles continue to crackle in the background.]

ARCHIVIST

I'm *really* not *comfortable* –

SASHA

So blow them out, then.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. *(slight pause)* Right, yeah –

MAGNUS

And make a wish.

ARCHIVIST

If I wish for you all to go away, do you think it'll work?

TIM

He's so *grumpy* today, isn't he Martin?

MARTIN

Uh – oh! Well, um –

TIM

(cutting him off) Do you think it's his looming sense of mortality?

[Martin splutters.]

MARTIN

Uh – I, I don't think –

ARCHIVIST

Fine.

[He blows out the candles. Everyone cheers, someone claps.]

TIM

So, what did you wish for?

ARCHIVIST

I can't tell you.

MAGNUS

He wished for a little bit of peace and quiet.

ARCHIVIST

(small inhale) Was it that obvious?

[Small exhale.]

MAGNUS

Oh, I wouldn't worry, John. It's an Archive. Quiet is very much the course du jour.

TIM

Well, after the party, at least. Wine, anyone?

ARCHIVIST

Tim, it's eleven in the morning.

[The cork pops.]

TIM

Pfft, yeah, at your *birthday party*.

[He begins pouring.]

ARCHIVIST

I *really* don't think it's *appropriate* –

MAGNUS

(overlapping) I'll allow it. In fact! I'll join you.

ARCHIVIST

(surprise) Oh! O-kay, um, a-al, alright then?

[Sounds of continued pouring behind all this.]

SASHA

Martin?

MARTIN

Oh! Uh, *(slight strained laugh)* I mean – I don't – normally – drink wine, you know – t-tannins are a proven headache trigger, and so –

SASHA

Martin.

[More pouring sounds.]

MARTIN

W-, uh – *(more stuttering)* – yeah, sure, maybe, just uh, a drop. Heh.

ARCHIVIST

(more statement than question) You know that there's a lot of tannin in tea as well?

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

Hang on, have you been recording this?

[Clothing rustling.]

TIM

Oh! Yeah! I – just thought it might be nice, you know, something to look back on when we're all old and sick of each other.

SASHA

You probably should have told us, Tim.

TIM

(laughing) What, are you afraid we're going to get sued over the

Happy Birthday song?

MARTIN

(slightly higher) Oh, oh, well I am *now!*

[Tim sighs.]

SASHA

It's just a bit of a privacy thing.

[ARCHIVIST]

(under his breath, hmph) Oh, hypocrite.

TIM

(overlapping) Alright, alright, *fine,* look. I'm turning it off. Any last words for your future selves?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. (to the tape) ***Fire Tim.***

[Tim laughs.]

[INT. SCOTLAND, A DAISY TONNER SAFEHOUSE, PRESENT DAY]

[We hear the strange howling background designating our fearful new world.]

[The Archivist exhales, somewhat shakily.]

[Something creaks.]

[He breathes again.]

[More creaking.]

[There's a soft knock-knock-knock at the door.]

[Footsteps.]

MARTIN

(gentle) Hey.

ARCHIVIST

Hi.

[His voice is rough, weary – a stark contrast to the younger version of himself we just heard on the tape.]

[More footsteps as Martin gets closer.]

MARTIN

You, uh, listening to the tapes again?

[Some rustling sounds as he situates himself.]

MARTIN

How many times is that, now?

ARCHIVIST

They were sent to me, Martin. *(inhale)* There's got to be some reason –

MARTIN

(sigh) Gloating, John. Elias won, and there were some tapes he'd kept for himself, and he wanted to gloat. So he sent them. I, I don't see-

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) He's not. *Elias*.

MARTIN

Jonah, then. I don't know; I find it hard to think of him as – *(pause, inhale)* I don't really like to think of him.

[Silence.]

[Martin sighs.]

MARTIN

You should get some sleep.

ARCHIVIST

(exhale) I – *(sigh)* Can't. I, I can't. I, I don't think I do anymore. Sleep. *(shaky sort of laugh)* How long's it been, now?

MARTIN

I don't know. It's not like there are days to count, anymore, *(sigh)* all the clocks are stopped, and…

[He trails off, somewhat shakily.]

ARCHIVIST

Well, I haven't yet. I get – tired, but it doesn't feel the same.

[The safehouse creaks.]

ARCHIVIST

Probably for the best. Sleep doesn't look… pleasant.

MARTIN

…No, it's. *(unsteady inhale)* It's. Not.

ARCHIVIST

I couldn't wake you.

MARTIN

I'm sorry.

ARCHIVIST

It's not –

[He sniffs, and then lets out a sound that's somewhat wheezy, almost strangled. It's unclear if it's a humorless laugh, or him near tears. Possibly both.]

ARCHIVIST

You're not the one who ended the world.

[The background howls. The safehouse creaks. Martin holds back a sigh.]

MARTIN

(somewhat forced brightness) Well, just as well I don't remember my dream.

ARCHIVIST

I do.

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

(inhale) I see most of the suffering around here. When it's quiet, it just – It's like.. I can.. see it, like I'm watching all of it.

MARTIN

You haven't been opening the curtains.

ARCHIVIST

No, I don't need to.

It can see us here, and.. and I can see out as well.

MARTIN

O-kay, we'll just file that under – *ominous* for now.

[A sigh.]

[More creaking.]

MARTIN

We *seem* safe enough in here, at least.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose so.

MARTIN

(trying) Bit of a hideaway?

ARCHIVIST

Or a prison.

MARTIN

..Yes. Still, better than outside.

[More creaking. There's now a musical component of the *outside*. It sounds… full of iron. It sounds like a certain portion of *The Magnus Archives'* theme, though it's not entirely recognizable as such.]

MARTIN

It sounds bad.

[The Archivist laughs that strange, humorless laugh.]

ARCHIVIST

It is.

[Brief silence.]

MARTIN

Are we still safe?

ARCHIVIST

Y-Yes. It – It doesn't want to harm me.

MARTIN

And me?

ARCHIVIST

I won't let it.

[More creaking.]

MARTIN

Um. *(uh)* Thanks.

[More silence. More creaking.]

[A breath.]

[Clothes rustling.]

MARTIN

John, it's not your fault.

ARCHIVIST

(sharp) Martin, can we **not** do this again?

MARTIN

Sorry.

ARCHIVIST

I'm just – I'm *mourning* a world I *killed* –

MARTIN

(overlapping, placating) I know –

ARCHIVIST

(increasingly fervent) and we're all *trapped* in its *rotting corpse!*–

MARTIN

Enough, John.

[The Archivist starts taking out a tape.]

ARCHIVIST

Have you heard the Gertrude one?

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

The Gertrude one; there are a few of them, but this is my favorite.

[Over their conversation, he gets the tape ready.]

MARTIN

(sigh) I don't –

ARCHIVIST

Just. Listen.

[He puts the tape in.]

[INT. THE MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, GERTRUDE'S OFFICE, MARCH 20TH, 2015]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

GERTRUDE

Right. If you're listening to this, then it is likely that – *(she breaks off, sighs)* No. Let's not beat around the bush. If you're listening to this, it means I'm dead. And you have been chosen to be my replacement as Head Archivist.

Hopefully, this means you, Sasha, but if someone else is hearing this, and Elias has made a different choice for some reason, then

these words are still very much intended for you.

Before I continue: It is very important to be *absolutely* clear this is not a joke. Nor is it any sort of prank, or game. Your colleagues have not convinced me to record this as an attempt to… *haze* you. This is completely serious. And very, very important for you to know.

If it is you I'm talking to, Sasha, hopefully your background in Artefact Storage will lend a certain degree of.. credence to my words. But others may have to take it on trust.

All I can do is assure you I am deadly serious. *(sigh)* So. The first thing you have to do is accept that you are in great danger, and will be for the rest of your life. There are now things that will actively be trying to kill you, due to your new role as Archivist, and Elias has plans for you that are little better.

You will also be unable to relinquish the position or quit the Institute, finding you are supernaturally compelled to remain.

In fact, it occurs to me that attempting to do so is probably the quickest and easiest way to establish the truth of what I am telling you, so I suggest you do so at the earliest possible opportunity.

Things you need to be aware of:

There exists in our world supernatural entities of incredible power that reflect and feed on the fears of all living creatures, but most commonly humans. Many consider them gods, and while I believe

that is far too simplistic a comparison, for our purposes here it is perhaps the most useful shorthand.

They do not rule our world, but they do exercise considerable power, which they generally manifest in the form of monstrous beings that spread further fear – or, incarnations, those humans who have willingly, though not always knowingly, chosen to take on the power of these entities.

You, unfortunately, have unwittingly made the decision to become one of those incarnations. For the Institute serves a being variously known as: The Eye, It Knows You, The Beholding, The Ceaseless Watcher. It is the fear of being watched, and judged, and having all your secrets known. The Institute serves as a way for it to harvest the fears of the other entities, dragging out the suffering of those who come to give statements and – claiming their terror.

But, there is another part of being the Archivist. These.. beings, these.. gods of fear – their followers believe that they have… rituals. Grand projects which, if successful, would allow them to enter our world, reshaping it in – unthinkable ways. Molding it into a dimension where terror is as natural as gravity.

You are now one such ritual.

I do not know the exact details of it, but be wary of whatever Elias asks you to do.

Oh, yes. On the subject of Elias: Trust nothing he says. He was originally known as Jonah Magnus, the founder of this Institute,

and I have known him also as James Wright, the previous head of this Institute.

He has certain… abilities of clairvoyance, which allow him to perceive out of any eye, real or symbolic, so be wary. Play ignorant as long as you can while you expand your own research.

I've managed to keep the Archives in a state of chaos for decades, as I believe his plan would benefit from their organization. But I leave that to your judgement. Certainly, the longer he is ignorant of how much you know, the better.

Above all else: be *ready*. There are many things out there loyal to other powers which know your importance to the Eye, and will want. You. Dead.

You are entering a new world, a place I've lived for most of my life. A place… *(she sighs)* A place that will often demand a high price from you. Pay it without hesitation, because one way or another, the world is now on your shoulders. *(sigh)*

I wish I had more time to explain it to you. But time is short, and hopefully my actions tonight will ensure that this tape never needs to see the light of day.

But if you are hearing it, then – good luck. Do what you have to do.

[She sighs, heavily.]

[The door opens.]

JURGEN LEITNER

Are you finished?

GERTRUDE

Jurgen! I told you to stay in the tunnels.

[Leitner walks in and pulls himself out a chair.]

LEITNER

Your message also told me it was urgent.

GERTRUDE

(sharper) If Elias is watching right now –

LEITNER

Then your recording all that was meaningless anyway. Besides, I'm not afraid of him.

GERTRUDE

Bravado. *(heh/hm)* Really?

LEITNER

Mmmmm – it's not *bravado* –

GERTRUDE

We're wasting time. Do you still have the Ruskin book?

LEITNER

I do, though I don't relish the thought of using it. Makes it rather hard to breathe, like your chest is being –

GERTRUDE

(overlapping) Do you know the gas main, a little way out in the tunnel?

LEITNER

I do.

GERTRUDE

I need you to move it.

LEITNER

(hem-and-haw) Iiiii, ummmm. That's. I mean it's not just earth; there's pipework, and all sorts of –

GERTRUDE

***Find** a way.* I need it to be directly under the Institute, or at least closer.

LEITNER

I'm more likely to rupture it, and fill the place with gas.

GERTRUDE

(heh) Hm, that would also be acceptable.

LEITNER

Mmm. I'll do what I can. *(sigh)* When do you need it?

GERTRUDE

If my guess is right, the Church's ritual should be collapsing any time now, so – immediately.

LEITNER

And if you're wrong?

GERTRUDE

Then a bit of gas will be the least of our worries.

LEITNER

…Right. What are you going to do?

GERTRUDE

Paper burns well.

[She holds up a container of liquid – it sloshes.]

GERTRUDE

Petrol burns better.

[It sloshes again. Leitner laughs.]

[The container sloshes again as Gertrude sets it down.]

LEITNER

I always forget your pyromaniac streak.

GERTRUDE

Mm. Remind me to tell you about Agnes sometime.

LEITNER

Right. *(brief pause)* Did you mean to leave the tape running?

GERTRUDE

Oh, good *grief*. Forty years I've been using them, and I *swear*, I'll nev–

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. SCOTLAND, A DAISY TONNER SAFEHOUSE, PRESENT DAY]

[Back to the howling world.]

ARCHIVIST

Can you imagine? If we'd had this?

MARTIN

But we didn't, did we.

ARCHIVIST

No –

MARTIN

So there's no point in dwelling. *(heavy breath)* John, I – This isn't healthy.

ARCHIVIST

Healthy? I am an Avatar of voyeuristic terror, who unquestioned *craving* for knowledge has condemned the entire world to an eternity of torment; *healthy* i-isn't – i,it's not –

MARTIN

Fine, fine. I get it.

ARCHIVIST

Besides. G- *(shaky)* Grief… is healthy. I,If nothing else, it pushes away the other feelings that that – *thing* wants me to experience.

MARTIN

It just – It *hurts* me to see you wallowing like this.

ARCHIVIST

(snapping) Well, some of us weren't able to cut ourselves off from the world before it ended.

[The safehouse creaks.]

MARTIN

That's not fair.

ARCHIVIST

No, it's not; I'm – I'm sorry, I just – *(large shaky breath)* It hurts.

MARTIN

I know.

ARCHIVIST

I need time.

MARTIN

I know. But we can't stay in this cabin forever.

ARCHIVIST

Why not? It – It's quiet, here, and I have you.

[It's Martin's turn for a humorless sound- half laugh, half exasperated sigh.]

MARTIN

What about food?

ARCHIVIST

What about it? When's the last time you thought to eat, or even felt hungry?

MARTIN

(quietly) What? *(louder, a revelation)* Uh – I don't know.

ARCHIVIST

No. Whatever is sustaining us now doesn't need us to eat.

MARTIN

That – That can't be possible.

ARCHIVIST

It's a new world, Martin; the natural laws are whatever they want them to be. And I suspect they don't much care to keep humanity fed and watered.

MARTIN

(inhale) Well, that as may be, we can't just stay here forever.

ARCHIVIST

What could possibly be out there that you want to see?

MARTIN

A way to stop this, a way to turn the world back!

ARCHIVIST

(softer) Do you really think there is one?

MARTIN

Well, if there is, it's not in here, is it?

ARCHIVIST

It's so – *(shaky breath)* It's so… *loud*, out there? The agony, the, the terror, I can see it all so much more clearly.

MARTIN

I'm sorry.

ARCHIVIST

No, it's – *(sigh)* I love you, I just – *(inhale)* I need more time.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

It's alright.

[Movement. Creaking. An exhale.]

MARTIN

It's alright; I'm good at waiting.

ARCHIVIST

(near whisper) Thank you. *(more normal)* I just wish it didn't feel like whatever's out there was waiting, too.

MARTIN

…Yeah.

[Brief silence, then-]

[Clothes rustling.]

MARTIN

Hey – Hey, when did you start recording?

[The safehouse creaks.]

ARCHIVIST

(confusion) I – didn't. I only brought one, and I've been using it to play the tapes.

MARTIN

Oh. (sigh) That's not a great sign.

ARCHIVIST

No. No, it's not.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG162 – A Cozy Cabin

Statement #########–2

[INT. THE MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, SOMETIME 2013-2014]

[We hear clinking, as if from some bottles. Someone turns some pages, then zips something.]

GERRY KEAY

Hmm.

GERTRUDE

Find anything interesting back there?

[As she speaks, Gerry startles and knocks down whatever it was that had been clinking. It hits the floor with a clatter.]

GERRY

Yeah, sorry, I was just, um – yeah.

GERTRUDE

Curiosity is a very dangerous trait in our line of work, Gerard.

GERRY

So is ignorance.

[Gertrude laughs: Fair enough.]

GERTRUDE

Well, you're not going to find *many* dark secrets in the stationery cupboard.

[One of them closes the cupboard.]

GERRY

(amused) Just the recorded confession of your evil plans, then.

[Something creaks.]

GERTRUDE

Oh, I'd be something of a fool to leave *that* one in the recorder.

GERRY

I've never really seen you use it.

GERTRUDE

Mm. It's generally *only* for those statements I think might be useful to my successor. Or, the occasional interview.

GERRY

So, do I get to hear them?

GERTRUDE

Perhaps. If you live long enough. But somehow I doubt Elias would look favorably on your application.

And if I'm being quite *honest* –

GERRY

(overlapping) Yeah, I know, I know. And I don't want your job.

GERTRUDE

Believe me, the perks aren't worth the shackles.

GERRY

(heard this all before) Yeah, yeah.

[Someone turns another page.]

GERRY

So, what's the verdict?

GERTRUDE

Hm?

GERRY

(duh) On *The Travels*.[1]

GERTRUDE

Oh – Burn it, I think. You said Mr. Hampton was dead?

[Page flip.]

GERRY

Yep – and **not** peacefully.

GERTRUDE

(overlapping) But you hadn't seen its powers…?

GERRY

Not directly.

GERTRUDE

Well, given the themes of the original, I doubt it has anything that would be worth the danger.

GERRY

And when in doubt…

GERTRUDE

Well, *quite*.

GERRY

Can I use your wastepaper bin?

GERTRUDE

Yes, it's just –

[She cuts off – just as there's a creak from a desk or chair, likely Gerry beginning to get up.]

GERTRUDE

Wait. Surely you didn't bring it *here!*

GERRY

Well, yeah, I, uh –

GERTRUDE

Gerard, we've ***talked*** about this. Bringing unvetted artefacts or books into the Archive is ***incredibly dangerous.***

GERRY

It's locked away!

GERTRUDE

And I'm sure the lock is very sturdy, but that doesn't stop it being

an unnecessary *risk.*

GERRY

(softer) Yeah. I'm sorry.

GERTRUDE

This is ***exactly*** the sort of thing that will get you killed!

GERRY

I said I was sorry!

[Briefest of pauses.]

GERTRUDE

Then we'll say no more about it.

[She goes back to flipping through pages.]

GERTRUDE

I don't enjoy being hard on you, but I really would rather you stayed broadly intact.

GERRY

I'm touched. You're going soft in your old age.

GERTRUDE

(heh) Well, you are occasionally useful. Despite your foolishness.

GERRY

Flatterer.

GERTRUDE

Heh. You can probably burn it in the back courtyard, if you're careful.

GERRY

(okay, okay) Yeah, will do.

GERTRUDE

And for goodness' sake, *make sure no one sees you*. The last thing we need is a letter to Elias about book burnings.

GERRY

Look, if you have somewhere *better* to burn these books, then –

GERTRUDE

(overlapping, jokingly over-the-top) Of *course,* Gerard! I just happened not to mention the network of sinister tunnels that snake beneath the Archive where I keep all my darkest secrets.

GERRY

I mean, you joke, but there could be! It's that kinda place.

GERTRUDE

I rather hope I would have found them by now. I like to think I'm not a *complete* incompetent.

GERRY

Until dementia hits.

GERTRUDE

Given my choice to confide in you, I rather suspect it already has.

[She flips more pages.]

GERTRUDE

Go burn your book!

[More flipping.]

GERRY

Gertrude.

GERTRUDE

(continuing her work) Mm?

GERRY

What happens if we fail?

[She stops.]

GERTRUDE

In… what sense?

GERRY

If we miss a ritual; you know – if one of them works.

GERTRUDE

Been losing sleep, have you?

GERRY

Yeah – something like that.

GERTRUDE

(measured) If we are lucky, then that failure will also mean our deaths.

[She exhales.]

GERRY

You don't think they can reach us after death?

GERTRUDE

I suppose that depends on your religious beliefs.

[Her chair creaks.]

GERTRUDE

Personally, I suspect death puts us beyond their power, either we find ourselves in some… afterlife, or because we simply – cease to be.

GERRY

Yeah, I guess.

GERTRUDE

And I am *certain* that either scenario is preferable to lingering in a world *they* control.

They're – *(sigh)* – already able to circumvent physics, and suspend natural laws. If one were to genuinely press through, I suspect they would rewrite them wholesale, most likely making them… utterly incomprehensible to any survivors.

They – They *might* still need us human enough to be afraid, but beyond that…

Let's just surmise that *(sigh)* petty rules like space or time would be unlikely to factor into the proceedings. They might even stop death entirely, deny us the one last escape, keeping us alive and afraid – forever.

[Pause. Gerry exhales. Then:]

GERRY

And taxes?

GERTRUDE

(heh) Taxes, I imagine, will continue.

Beyond that, I honestly don't know. I suppose it depends on which one comes through. The world of the Stranger would be – very different to that of the Corruption.

GERRY

Eugh. *(pause)* And if it *does* happen –

GERTRUDE

It's my fondest ambition to make sure it does not.

GERRY

Yeah, sure, but – suppose it *does.*

GERTRUDE

(sigh) Very well.

GERRY

Could it be undone?

[Silence.]

[Gertrude takes a breath. Her chair creaks.]

GERTRUDE

(decision made) No. *I* don't think so. Once an Entity fully manifested, I doubt it would be keen to fully relinquish its grip on realit–

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. SCOTLAND, A DAISY TONNER SAFEHOUSE, PRESENT DAY]

[The roaring of the post-ritual world is quieter than last time. The safehouse creaks as –]

[THE TAPE IS REWOUND.]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[INT. THE MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, SOMETIME 2013-2014]

GERTRUDE

No. *I* don't think so. Once an –

[INT. SCOTLAND, A DAISY TONNER SAFEHOUSE, PRESENT DAY]

[TAPE IS REWOUND.]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[INT. THE MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, SOMETIME 2013-2014]

GERTRUDE

No. *I* don't think so.

[INT. SCOTLAND, A DAISY TONNER SAFEHOUSE, PRESENT DAY]

[TAPE IS REWOUND.]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[INT. THE MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, SOMETIME

2013-2014]

GERTRUDE

I don't think so.

[INT. SCOTLAND, A DAISY TONNER SAFEHOUSE, PRESENT DAY]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[The safehouse creaks for a very long time.]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[INT. THE MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, SOMETIME 2013-2014]

GERTRUDE

Once an Entity fully manifested, I doubt it would be keen to relinquish its grip on reality. And as for those unlucky enough to survive its rule… I don't think they'd be in a state to do anything about it.

[Gerry exhales, a big heavy *pfft* of a thing. We hear some

clothing sounds.]

GERRY

Well. Then I guess we'd better not let it happen.

GERTRUDE.

Well. Quite.

Now. I believe you have an evil book to burn?

GERRY

Yeah. Of course.

[His clothing rustles as he makes to get up.]

GERRY

You, uh – need anything else burning?

GERTRUDE

(a bit of a laugh to it) No, no. Not right now. I think I'm alright, thank you for the offer.

GERRY

Right.

GERTRUDE

Oh, and, Gerard –

GERRY

Hm?

[Chair creak.]

GERTRUDE

Don't go rifling through my things in future. It could end… badly for you.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. SCOTLAND, A DAISY TONNER SAFEHOUSE, PRESENT DAY]

[The tape recorder is opened, and the Gertrude/Gerry tape taken out. Another tape is put in.]

[The safehouse creaks during it all.]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[INT. THE MAGNUS INSTITUTE, ARCHIVES, JOHN'S TENURE,

PRE-READING OF ANGLERFISH *(2015)*]

[Some rummaging noises.]

SASHA

This it?

TIM

Oh, thank *god.* I thought I was seeing things.

SASHA

Glad I could help.

TIM

I didn't know he was actually gonna ask me to *get it* for him; I just mentioned it 'cause he was talking about *recording.*

SASHA

Well, I'm sure he's waiting!

TIM

(grumble) Mm, he can wait a bit longer.

[There's a knock-knock-knock type sound.]

SASHA

Fantastic! Good of you to volunteer to help me.

TIM

Uh – *I,* I didn't actually –

SASHA

Grab a stapler.

[Tim sighs in defeat.]

TIM

Fine. (another knock) What are we doing?

[We hear some more pages rustling.]

SASHA

John's been getting frustrated with all the loose statement sheets around. *(stapler)* I'm going box by box, collating and stapling them. And now, so are you.

TIM

(exaggerated sigh) If you say so.

SASHA

(mock sympathy) I do.

[You can hear the smile in her voice as she speaks.]

[A few moments pass in silence with them flipping through statements and stapling. Then there's a sigh from Tim, and:]

TIM

So. How are you finding our new leader?

[Stapler.]

SASHA

Mm, alright, I suppose. Early days yet.

[More page flipping.]

TIM

Sure, sure.

[Stapler. Pages.]

TIM

Do you think he knows what he's doing?

SASHA

Mm, he'll get there. *(stapler)* I just wish he wouldn't take it out on

Martin in the meantime.

[As their conversation continues, so do the stapling and page sounds.]

TIM

(heh) If only there had been someone more qualified!

SASHA

Tim.

TIM

Sasha.

SASHA

(same tone) It's Elias's decision.

TIM

It's some sexist *bullshit,* is what it is.

SASHA

I mean. Probably.

TIM

Look, it should have been you, and you just know if you had called him out, the little weasel would start talking about *traditions,* and –

(bad Elias impersonation) – the values of our esteemed founder, Jimmy Magma.

[Sasha starts laughing.]

TIM

Jonie… Magnum?

SASHA

Closer.

TIM

Jack Magnet?

SASHA

(laughing) That's the one.

TIM

Ah, I'm serious, though. You should *say* something.

SASHA

Mm, *Tim* – I've been in academia for what, ten years now?

TIM

Mm.

SASHA

I know how this goes! I didn't get the job. If I kick up a stink, I'll just get blackballed.

TIM

(resigned) Ah, yeah. *(brief pause, mischievous)* What if we kill him?

SASHA

(ha) What, Elias?

TIM

No. Big Boss Sims. Cut the brakes on his office chair; no one would *ever know*.

[Sasha starts laughing again.]

TIM

Swap in a poisoned tea bag, pin it on Martin – the *perfect* crime.

SASHA

(still laughing) And how do you know that you won't be the one that gets it? That boy makes a *lot* of tea.

TIM

No, it's okay; I spent the last few years building up an immunity to

iocaine powder.

[Sasha lets out an exaggerated groan at the reference. Tim *heh*s.]

[A brief moment of silence, then:]

TIM

So, what *are* you gonna do?

SASHA

I don't know, really. Might just get another job.

TIM

What, seriously, just jump ship?

SASHA

(eh) Yeah, I guess so. I mean, there's not much out there at the moment, but I've got a few alerts set up.

TIM

(rueful) I can't believe you'd just abandon our intense will-they, won't-they storyline like that.

SASHA

Eeerm, I'm pretty sure we established it's very much *won't they*.

TIM

No, no, no, no, see – we had the ill-advised hookup, the awkward aftermath, and the gradually rebuilt friendship, but – that's all season two stuff. We've got like five more seasons before we get the heartwarming epilogue that makes it canon.

SASHA

I know it's hard to hear, mate, but you're *not* the love interest. *(beat)* I think you might be the character they drop after the pilot!

TIM

(you wound me) Uh, *wow*. You *are* vicious today.

SASHA

Sorry, Tim! I can't hear you over all this stapling.

[They staple in silence for a bit. Sasha sighs.]

SASHA

I guess it's just – I don't have anything *keeping* me here. You've got your brother –

TIM

(quieter) Yeah.

SASHA

Sorry. And Martin can't go anywhere that'll look too hard at his CV.

TIM

Wait. How do *you* know about that?

SASHA

It's all on the system. Our digital security is shocking, by the way. Besides, it's not even a good lie.

TIM

Okay, but seriously, you cannot let Martin know. He'll think I told you, and I *swore* to keep schtum.

SASHA

Hey, don't worry. I mean – I kinda just ended up here. And I like it – l,liked it. But if I'm bashing my head against the glass ceiling, it's time to go.

TIM

Well. I'll miss you.

SASHA

(fond) Yeah. You *will.*

TIM

Oh, for god's sake. *(bad impression of presumably everyone else at the*

*Institute) Oh, Tim's so hard to talk to, seriously, he won't stop making jokes and references, not like **Sasha**. (normal)* They've got no idea.

SASHA

(ha!) And they never will.

TIM

Seriously, though. Everyone thinks you're just this reliable, down-to-earth *nerd* –

SASHA

And what makes you think they're wrong?

TIM

So what, actually *I'm* the one who doesn't get to see the real you?

SASHA

No such thing.

TIM

As what?

SASHA

A – A real you. I don't think so, at least. It's all just masks.

TIM

(amused) Alright, Stanislavski.

SASHA

You know what I mean.

TIM

You really believe that?

SASHA

Kind of! I mean, who knows why we do what we do?

TIM

I do.

SASHA

No. All you know is what your brain does to *justify* what you do. It's no more *reason* than the face you put on for John. The only *real* you is the actions you take.

TIM

Hey, I'll have you know I have a rich inner life.

SASHA

How nice for you. But hurry up with your outer one; you're falling behind, and I'm not saving you any staples.

TIM

(laughing) Yeah, yeah. I still can't believe Gertrude was allowed to let this place get into such a state!

SASHA

Mm. I just wanna know *why*.

TIM

What d'you mean *why*? You saw her, she's like a hundred years old and more cardigan than woman. She just started to lose it. Sad, but it happens.

SASHA

You never talked to her, did you?

TIM

Well, I mean, I must have at some point.

SASHA

(heh) You'd *remember*.

TIM

Why? What was she like?

SASHA

Stone. Cold. Bitch.

TIM

Sasha!

SASHA

And sharper than you! No way this is accidental.

TIM

(pfft) Oh, yeah, this is all a big geriatric conspiracy.

[Silence.]

TIM

Wait, seriously?

SASHA

Mhm.

TIM

What *possible* reason could she have for being criminally incompetent in a manky old archive?

SASHA

No idea. And honestly, it kind of worries me.

TIM

Well, tell you what. If you get eaten alive by improperly filed statements, me and Martin will avenge you.

SASHA

(tch) Well, aren't you sweet.

TIM

I mean it! We'll burn this place to the ground, it'll be all like *(mock yelling) SASHA! SAASHAAAAA!*

SASHA

And what about John?

TIM

(John impression) Well, given the incoherence of this statement, I find it hard to believe it ever occurred.

[Sasha laughs.]

TIM

In fact, based on the evidence, I find it ***highly*** *unlikely that Sasha ever even existed at all.*

SASHA

No. You took it too far! I'm unforgettable!

[Tim laughs.]

TIM

Alright. He fires you because of all the drugs and the wild orgies on Archive property.

SASHA

(still laughing) Yeah, that's fair. Now, get back to work.

TIM

Yes, ma'am! See? Told you you'd make a good boss.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[INT. SCOTLAND, A DAISY TONNER SAFEHOUSE, PRESENT DAY]

[The background roars.]

[The Archivist's breaths come shaky.]

[The safehouse creaks.]

[The Archivist exhales; the safehouse creaks again; a brown static begins to rise from the background.]

ARCHIVIST

(quiet) Wha–

[The static continues to rise in volume.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT?)

There is a place, deep in the heart of fear, where you trap yourself and claim that it is safety.

[The static dies slightly to a comfortable level.]

It was once a cabin and professes still to be such, but as with all in this new world that promises respite, it is a trap.

[The safe house creaks.]

The land outside is warped and twisted by the touch of those things that feed on your suffering, and behind those rough, wooden planks it seems they cannot reach you.

The screams may linger on the distant breeze, and your Eye may wander beyond the curtains from time to time, but you and the one you love are, it seems, safe.

If you had need to eat, no doubt there would be food; if you had need to sleep, no doubt the beds would be welcoming.

But you have need of neither, and so you sit in your meager comfort and belief of security with nothing to do, nothing to distract your mind from the agonies that lie just beyond your

window.

And those diversions you *do* find will offer no relief –

[The safehouse creaks.]

– but simply numb the mind into mournful nostalgia for a time when the world you inhabited seemed to make *sense*.

[The safehouse creaks. The outside howls.]

Something moves outside, struggling to crawl upon a hundred reaching, grasping hands. It shudders, and grips the earth, pulling itself along as nails rip free and skin scrapes loose. It is afraid of what it has become and where it might be going.

[The safehouse creaks.]

Close your eyes.

[The static subtly acquires another, whiter layer, higher and hissing.]

Ignore the sounds. You, at least, are safe.

[The safehouse creaks.]

There, within the thing that pretends to be a cabin, is the one you

love. You hold each other –

[Creak.]

– whisper words of reassurance, but the place knows this comfort to be a lie, and laces upon it instead the awful fear of losing what you have.

[The safehouse is now creaking continuously over his words.]

Of it being stripped away by the chaos that waits for you beyond the walls.

Hold each other, it croons. *Be happy*. But know always that this happiness is a lie, built on the squirming bones of those whose suffering you have caused.

It will not let you feel the warmth and joy that this love may claim to gift. *(lower)* It is only a moldy treasure to be clung to. Something to fear the loss of as you hold it so tight that it withers and warps.

It is a rotten sanctuary of lonely companionship.

Outside it is raining. Heavy drops fall, ice-cold and laced with salt. Tears of voyeuristic delight from the eyes that see and drink in all.

It sinks, into the dry, cracked ground, and from the mud faces struggle to push themselves free and breathe. They cannot reach the surface, as the slick soil flows down their throats.

Look closer at the rough planks that make this cabin, and see that they are warmer, softer and more yielding than the hard timber they present. Are the dimensions of this place quite what they were when you stayed here before the change?

Or are the walls thicker, the doors heavier when they close? Were the curtains always stained that dull maroon? Or has the dust of the horrific world they keep at bay dyed them so.

The one you love is always near, so close that refuge sometimes feels a prison. And yet your voice does not echo when you call to them. And they find they sometimes cannot hear it.

[The static begins to intensify again.]

Stay, the cabin says.

[A clap of thunder!]

Stay within my false defenses, cling so close to what you desperately wish to save, and live in shaking fear of the things beyond that may take it from you. Throw another log on the fire and curl up close. There are *always* more logs for the fire here.

This is your home, and here you can be safe, as you putrefy, body and soul.

This place wishes to be our tomb. But the Eye does not wish that.

[Rumbling. The static intensifies yet again.]

No, the Eye wishes instead that it be my chrysalis.

It is time that I emerge.

ARCHIVIST

Ah-ah!

[Something falls to the floor and/or knocks against a table. Possibly the Archivist. The static recedes slightly. Martin opens a door and we hear him come in. The soft fire that's been crackling for a while is a little more obvious now, though it's still in the background.]

MARTIN

John? Is it – I thought I heard – are you – are you okay?

ARCHIVIST

I,ye– yes, I *(sigh)* I think so.

MARTIN

What happened? The tapes, were y–

ARCHIVIST

I, I was listening, and, i-it- it was the one with – Tim and, and Sasha, uh, where they're –

MARTIN

Yeah, y-yeah. *(soft)* Yeah. *(shaky breath)* Look, John, I – I know it hurts, but you've just got to –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) No, no – O,Oka– *(stops, starts over)* I, I was listening, and I, I was *filled* with this… hatred. This anger; I, I wanted to leave *(heh)* and hunt down *Elias,* uh, and –

MARTIN

(overlapping) Uh – w,wow, okay.

ARCHIVIST

But when I thought it, th-there was – there was something else.

[The safehouse creaks.]

ARCHIVIST

Th-This place, it – it didn't want me – it didn't want *us*- to go.

MARTIN

What do you mean?

ARCHIVIST

This cabin.

[It creaks.]

ARCHIVIST

It's not right.

[It creaks some more.]

ARCHIVIST

And when I thought that, I-I felt – *(inhale)* It, it all poured out of me, down into the tape. I, I, I – and it –

[Martin sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

– felt good. I-It felt *right*.

MARTIN

Okay. *(pause)* So you're recording again?

ARCHIVIST

I – I might need to. If we're going to make it.

[Creeeak.]

MARTIN

(genuinely surprised) Back to the Archives?

ARCHIVIST

Seems the best place to start.

MARTIN

Oh – *(surprised exhale)* Y,yeah, alright!

[The safehouse keeps creaking in the background.]

ARCHIVIST

Martin, it's going to be a hard journey. One in which w–

MARTIN

(fast, excited) Yeah, yeah, yeah, so – I've actually had a couple of bags packed for a while now.

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Oh!

[Martin starts getting out said bags as he speaks.]

MARTIN

(overlapping) Um, I found some rope in the attic,

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Okay –

MARTIN

(overlapping) and I packed that with the maps.

ARCHIVIST

(audible smile) Uh, *Martin* –

[We hear Martin zipping/unzipping things over this conversation.]

MARTIN

No, no, no; I – I know what you're going to say, *(put-upon Spooky John impression) What good are maps when the very Earth has…* eh, blah blah blah.

ARCHIVIST

W,w,well yes.

MARTIN

(on a roll) But I, I packed them anyway, because you never. Know.

ARCHIVIST

(fond) Martin.

MARTIN

I – I actually – *(heh)* I actually found a stash of tea under the kitchen sink – I –

[Fond sigh from the Archivist.]

MARTIN

I realize we don't need to *eat*, or – whatever, but, you know, that doesn't mean that we won't –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping, extremely fond) Yes – Yes, yes, it – alright. Alright.

[Sounds of movement.]

MARTIN

We've *got* this.

[One of them sorts through all the stuff Martin's got ready.]

ARCHIVIST

(audible smile) Apparently so.

[More rummaging sounds.]

MARTIN

D'you think it'll do anything? Confronting Elias?

[The rummaging continues.]

ARCHIVIST

I – *(sigh)* Maybe?

MARTIN

No, I'm serious – Do we –

[One last sound of movement, and then it stops.]

MARTIN

Is there a chance that we can undo this?

[The fire crackles.]

ARCHIVIST

(large inhale, then exhale) Gertrude didn't think so.

[The safehouse creaks.]

MARTIN

Right.

ARCHIVIST

But she's dead. *(inhale)* Let's find out for ourselves.

[He hoists up something, or many things; we hear the contents slide around a bit.]

MARTIN

You're – taking the recorder?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, just in case I need to – vent. Again, it – *(inhale)* it helps.

MARTIN

(heavy inhale/exhale) Okay.

[He picks up something of his own – his bag.]

MARTIN

You said this place – the, the cabin was – it – it's *feeding* on us, right?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

So, should we destroy it? Before we go?

[The cabin creaks *very loudly*.]

ARCHIVIST

I honestly don't know if we can.

[He sighs.]

MARTIN

Mm.

ARCHIVIST

Besides, there's – far worse out there. Better to try and avoid it, I think.

MARTIN

We're not even gonna try? Look, we've got your lighter; maybe if we just –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) We can't fight the *world*, Martin.

[A little breath of a laugh from him.]

MARTIN

(hmph) Says *you.*

[The Archivist exhales.]

ARCHIVIST

Let's go.

[We hear them grab their stuff. The world howls on outside.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

1. Likely referring to *The Travels of Marco Polo.* ↩

MAG163 - In the Trenches

Statement #########-3

[EXT. SCOTLAND, AROUND KINLOSS]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Footsteps, on grimy, almost *wet* ground. In the background, wind is howling.]

[An exhale.]

MARTIN

Oh, I'm *knackered.*

ARCHIVIST

Are you?

MARTIN

I –

[They both stop.]

MARTIN

Hm.

[He takes another step, then stops again.]

MARTIN

Well – Okay, well, no, no; I suppose not. But I think I should be.

ARCHIVIST

Yep.

MARTIN

How long have we been *walking?*

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) Fourteen hours and twenty-three minutes.

[He takes a step.]

MARTIN

What, seriously?!

ARCHIVIST

Yes. I – don't think it means much out here, though.

MARTIN

We should probably rest.

ARCHIVIST

Maybe – I don't know, I – I don't know if we *can*. Rest. It – feels more like, well – waiting.

[He sighs. They both take a few more steps.]

[Another sigh.]

MARTIN

…So. Are we going to walk all the way to London?

ARCHIVIST

(a bit of a laugh) If you know an alternative, I'd be very keen to hear it.

MARTIN

I mean – cars? You know, planes, trains, automobiles?

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) It wouldn't help.

MARTIN

Alright, a *boat* then.

ARCHIVIST

Geography doesn't work anymore. Space, i– doesn't work.

MARTIN

Alright. So what does that *mean?*

ARCHIVIST

It means the journey will be the journey, regardless of how we choose to make it.

MARTIN

Right. And you're sure we can't just, you know –

[Another shuffle.]

MARTIN

Speed it up a bit?

ARCHIVIST

(inhale) No.

[He exhales heavily.]

MARTIN

Right. I just – Don't like being out here.

ARCHIVIST

(heh) You see that tower, way off in the distance?

MARTIN

(don't like where this is going) Yeah. *(beat, sigh)* It's watching us, isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

The Panopticon and the Institute. Merged into something entirely new.

MARTIN

(splutter-scoff) Wai– what? No, there's, there's no *way* we can see it from here. We – We must still be a *hundred miles* from the border, never mind *London!*

ARCHIVIST

You could see that tower from anywhere on Earth. And it can see you. And if you walk towards it, eventually you'll get there. But you have to go through everything in between.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

(bright) You're being ominous again.

ARCHIVIST

(ah!) Sorry. Sorry.

MARTIN

What do you mean ‘everything?’ What’s out here?

[The Archivist inhales. As he does so, there’s a sort of creaking – and then we hear the weakest strains of bagpipes beginning to fade through.]

ARCHIVIST

Nightmares. Come on, that trench is our first.

[He starts walking.]

MARTIN

What tre–? Where did that…? Why is that here?

ARCHIVIST

In the world as was, we wouldn’t be too far from Kinloss Barracks. So instead, we get the trench.

MARTIN

How’d you *know* all this stuff?

ARCHIVIST

Not sure. I just do.

MARTIN

(quieter) John. I'm scared.

ARCHIVIST

Yes. *(sigh)* That's the idea.

[They start walking.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[EXT. SCOTLAND, AROUND KINLOSS, THE TRENCH, A BIT LATER]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The bagpipes are much louder. We're in the middle of the action. There are guns being shot and bullets flying and all around, the clattering of war. Grenades. Explosions. Any voices need to shout to be heard over the racket.]

MARTIN

Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!

ARCHIVIST

Martin! Stay with me; don't let go!

MARTIN

Oh…

ARCHIVIST

Come on!

MARTIN

Shit, shit, shit –

ARCHIVIST

It's *okay.*

MARTIN

No!

ARCHIVIST

You're okay!

MARTIN

I don't know *[unintelligible]*, okay? This is *not* okay!

ARCHIVIST

Listen, ***come on!***

[He groans, clearly straining with effort. There's scraping, the sound of something driving off – and they're both left heaving breaths in the aftermath.]

[The sound of war is still present in the background; there's still a light flute over everything.]

ARCHIVIST

(still regaining breath) Are you –

MARTIN

(still shaky, voice wet) I'm fine, fine; I'm just – How, how about you; you're not hurt?

ARCHIVIST

Uh… *(checks)* No. No, I'm not.

MARTIN

(overlapping) Good. Good. *(space)* Good.

[He exhales, then –]

MARTIN

(!) J, J,J-John. John. We're not alone.

ARCHIVIST

Ignore them; they're, they're not – Just ignore them.

[Still shouts and roars in the background. Martin's still breathing quickly.]

MARTIN

They're not – real?

ARCHIVIST

(humorless laugh) No, they're real. They were normal people before the –

Before me. *(exhale)* But now they're here, meat for the grinder. I just mean there's no point – talking to them.

MARTIN

(overlapping) Don't be a prick, John. *(to the people)* Hey, I'm – I'm sorry about him; he's, he's going through a lot – well, we all are, I suppose, but – *hi*, I guess.

[No response.]

MARTIN

Hello?

ARCHIVIST

They *won't* hear you, Martin. They're all – too busy waiting to die.

MARTIN

John…

ARCHIVIST

They sit here –

[A rumbling, deep static begins to build.]

ARCHIVIST

– the image of everyone they hold dear locked in their mind, knowing they'll never see them again. Waiting for the order.

[As he speaks, the higher, shinier component of the Archivist's static begins to come in, initially at a low fade but rising quickly.]

ARCHIVIST

Dreading the bullet or the drone or the barbed wire that will tear them to shreds and leave them nothing but a *bloody* –

MARTIN

J,John, enough – Enough!

[The static fades out. Something is fired in the background.]

MARTIN

Please don't tell me these things.

ARCHIVIST

I – I'm sorry, I – There's just so much.

There's so much, Martin, and I know all of it – I can – *see* all of it, and I – it's filling me up; I need to let it out!

[His voice gains in intensity as he says it; it's also beginning to shake. Martin is firm, though:]

MARTIN

I'm sorry, but tough. Okay, th-that's not what I'm here for.

I *can't* be that for you; I, I-I just. Can't.

ARCHIVIST

(softer) I-I know. *(beat, sigh)* I'll, I'll use the tape recorder.

[We hear the rattling of its plastic as he begins to get it out.]

ARCHIVIST

I just – *(heavy sigh)* You'll probably want to wait outside.

MARTIN

(sorry, did you just lose the last remaining brain cell????) Um, *no?*

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) Well, put your fingers in your ears, then, I, I suppose.

[Martin pffts, then sighs.]

MARTIN

Fine, and what about them?

ARCHIVIST

They don't even know we're here. We're not part of their nightmare.

[Something drips.]

MARTIN

Right.

[It drips again. Presumably Martin puts his fingers in his ears at this point. Whatever it is keeps dripping as the Archivist speaks.]

ARCHIVIST

(testing) Martin? *(slightly louder)* **Martin?** *(one more test)* Martin, I hate your tea, and wish you made coffee instead. *(hm)* Alright then.

[He sighs heavily. All at once, the static from earlier comes rushing right back in as if it had never left.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

There is a wound in the earth.

A bayonet gouge scored through the soft and sodden mud for uncounted miles. A trench that marks the front line of a war that has no name. It has always been raging, deep in the hearts of the powerful and those that thirst to see bodies piled high in their name.

And now it has a battleground. A thousand pointless conflicts and bitter stalemates stitched together like a triaged chest wound.

It is a butchered border, a thin and punctured membrane between the unending meat grinder and the terrified victims it longs for.

You may find this trench reaching all across the world, and it will never stop, never be satisfied, never think of peace.

Charlie stands there, waiting in a transport.

Once, it was a thin metal landing craft, drifting slowly through a fetid lake. The waters were red and black by turns with blood and oil and the floating bodies of those before them, that were pushed aside by the boat's wake.

Next to him, Charlie saw Ryan, who he'd known since childhood, though the other details were hazy. Ryan gave him a thumbs up and an encouraging smile – before his face exploded inwards to a sniper's bullet, peppering the boat with shards of bone and gore.

Charlie swallowed, and waited as the bullets kept coming and those around him died but did not fall, propped up as they were by the

pressing mass of people around them.

He could not move, and as he waited for the shot that would take him, his legs fell away in fear.

Now he is in a helicopter, strapped in tight and unable to move. The man in the gunner's chair is dead, bound limp in his seat harness, half his jaw gone. The thump-thump-thump of the rotors pulses through Charlie like a toothache, and he cannot hear the shouts and cries of his comrades.

He looks out of the side as a telltale line of smoke arcs up and around towards them from the scorched earth far below. He cannot hear his own scream.

He lies upon the ground, amid the twisted wreckage of whatever he was trapped in, feeling the jagged shards of broken bone dig into him.

Charlie looks up, and sees something floating there, silently. It is sleek, and merciless, its featureless carbon-fiber face regarding the shattered man dispassionately. The drone's camera blinks once, twice as he tries desperately to crawl away, pain lancing through every part of him.

The thing makes no sound as it follows him, matching the excruciating pace of the bleeding soldier. Charlie knows when it decides to fire, he won't even hear it.

He places his hand down and it sinks, suddenly, into the mud. He

cries out as the rusted barbed wire curls itself eagerly around his wrist, digging into his skin.

Tasting fear, more wire slithers through the churned earth towards him, stretching and gripping him tight, rough needles puncturing his legs and chest and throat, pulling him down and holding him steady as the drone lingers, its blankness giving no hint of the thoughts behind its trigger.

There is a rumbling in the earth around him as a tank speeds along its unstoppable path, and Charlie is immediately pulled under its tread.

He has a moment of shocked horror before being reduced to a smear in the mud.

Inside the tank, Ishaan screams.

Ishaan remembers the recruiters. He was promised valor, and camaraderie, and the chance to be part of something meaningful. He knew that part had been a lie, but then – so was the choice. His alternative was stagnant poverty, and that was really no choice at all.

The money would help his family, and he could spend some years in hell, if he needed to. For them.

But he didn't know about this war, that had always been raging and would never stop. How could he have known what the trench would be?

They had taken him, dragged him from the flooded foxhole where he had sheltered for a moment's brief respite, and taken him to the tanks, those monstrous beasts of iron that rolled forever forward, guns firing and treads leaving the earth scarred in their wake.

They pass above the trench again and again and they never turn around, pushing onward, ever onwards, the bones that stick in their gears not slowing them for a moment.

Ishaan had been afraid. Terrified that they were going to strap him to it, pin him to the Goliath's hull like all the other flayed flags of war, striking fear into the hearts of the enemy.

But instead they fed him to it, tossed him into its burning innards and sealed the hatch behind him.

Now, his body has contorted itself to fit, his fingers clutched around the firing lever; pulling it frantically is the only thing that will reduce the impossible heat even for a moment.

From the tiny slit in the metal, he can see other soldiers: baby-faced friends and the monstrous, pig-faced enemy, both falling underneath his iron coffin's advance.

He tries to cry, but his tears turn to steam.

He waits, craving and dreading the final kiss of the bombs, the terrible thundering guns so far away that none have ever seen them, raining their arbitrary ruin upon the endless fields of the dead and dying.

They are perhaps the only things that can fell the tanks, splitting them like rotten fruit beneath the force of their rounds.

Ishaan begs, pleading with whatever god of hatred and pain he hears piping gently on the breeze to let the bombs rain down on him. To release him from his imprisonment in a single flash of destruction.

But when his prayer is answered, the white-hot agony of melted and crumpled metal is like nothing he could dream of.

When Hasana takes him into triage, she can barely bring herself to look at him.

She wheels his stretcher to its place in the stinking, vaulted tent that serves as a field-hospital, walking through a sea of bandages and around the piles of festering gauze.

She leaves the shuddering man and approaches a nearby doctor, its long form crouched over the open chest of a patient, its many hands a frenzy of scalpel, bonesaw, and needle as it giggles beneath its surgeon's mask.

She wants to ask about the wounded, about what to do, where to put the new ones, how to help them, but even if her voice was not drowned out by the thousand-strong chorus of moaned and pained yelling that fills the tent, the doctor doesn't seem to notice her.

Hasana's eyes fall on the entrance to the tent, and she sees the line of civilians, stretching away into the distance. They are no less

maimed, their agonies no more bearable, but there is simply no room.

She tries to apologize, but instead she closes the tent.

As she does so, she sees the trench behind her, and, not for the first time, Hasana considers trying to run.

But there is no mercy for deserters here. On one side of the trench the hungry guns of the vile enemy wait. And on the other, the just guns of heroes will cut you down no slower, save perhaps a breath to call you coward.

So she waits there, in the middle, with the weeping, wounded, and the soon to be dead. Waiting for the enemy to overrun them.

Sometimes, in the distance, Hasana sees them. The enemy, their skin rough, dark, and scaly; their faces twisted around cruel tusks, viciously sharpened teeth, and a pair of beady red eyes. Their lips are smeared crimson with the blood of children, and their greatest delight is to pluck the eyes of the innocent with their bayonets.

To call them monsters is the simple truth. They feel no pain, no remorse, and seek nothing but carnage.

Sometimes, in the distance, Hasana can even see an enemy triage tent, almost identical in appearance to her own. She can only imagine the atrocities that must take place inside.

Far in the distance, she sees Alexei look out over the battlefield, and her stomach turns at the detestable wrongness of his face.

Alexei in turn looks out from deep in the trench. He catches sight of the enemy, their shriveled rat-like heads causing the bile to rise in his throats.

He is bored. The boredom is the worst part, the part that erodes his will and drops him to despair.

There is nothing to do, nowhere to be. The only thing to occupy his mind is the inevitability of the next attack, the next order to charge, the next dropping bomb.

There is no way to know when and where these things will come. But no one will talk of anything else.

His stomach growls, the hunger pushing its sharp fingers out from his belly. There are no more rations, and what there is tastes of cordite and sand, and coats his tongue in an oily film that makes him gag.

He has heard the enemy will eat your body if they find it in the mud. They won't even check if you're dead first. Alexei shudders at the thought.

From far down the trench, a cry of panic cuts through the silence. A faint haze can be seen in the distance, moving with the breeze. A new weapon?

Alexei feels his knees start to buckle as he sees his comrades stagger out of the cloud. Their melting teeth flow down their faces like tears, and their limbs begin to fold and collapse as the bones within

them liquefy.

He turns and starts to flee down the trench. There is no cruelty so foul the enemy will not perpetrate it.

He runs almost headfirst into a portly man in a tailored suit with a blood-red flower on his lapel. He smiles, pale skin splitting beneath his bristling white mustache, and he begins to shake Alexei by the hand.

"*Good* lad," he says. "*Good* lad. Heroes one and all. A noble sacrifice."

Alexei starts to speak, to say he doesn't want to be a hero; he doesn't *want* to be a sacrifice; he wants to go home. But the man with the flower reaches his hand into the soldier's chest, and with a single, jolly motion, plucks out Alexei's heart and places it in his wallet.

Next to his bleeding corpse, Charlie wakes from what passes for sleep in this place. A sergeant is yelling at him, screaming for him to take his gun and get into the waiting transport. There's about to be another attack, and heavy losses are expected.

A familiar fear courses through him, but Charlie still picks up his gun, and goes back to the war.

[The Archivist sighs heavily.]

ARCHIVIST

I, um.

[He sighs heavily, mutters something garbled.]

ARCHIVIST

End recording.

[He clears his throat. From somewhere near him, Martin *hm*s.]

MARTIN

All done?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

[When he speaks, his voice is still a bit shaky.]

MARTIN

Good.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[EXT. SCOTLAND, SOMEWHERE FARTHER OUT FROM KINLOSS]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The bagpipes are still playing, though they sound much further in the distance.]

[The Archivist and Martin are trying to make their way through what sounds like water.]

ARCHIVIST

(calling) Try to keep up!

MARTIN

(long-suffering) Yeah, yeah.

[He *pffts* out an exhale, keeps making his way forward until –]

[He notices the tape recorder.]

MARTIN

Oh! Oh, hey – John! Did you – *(stops himself)* No. No, he was carrying his.

[He inhales heavily.]

MARTIN

Alright! *(exhale) (to the recorder)* What're you doing here? It's

dangerous. Could – get yourself blown up, like all these poor…

[He trails off. It sounds like he's picked up the recorder by now.]

MARTIN

Who d'you think they were? Really don't see why we couldn't just – go 'round, picked a better place to –

[He stomps a bit heavier in the "water."]

MARTIN

I guess there – aren't really any better places anymore, are there? It's all this, or worse, or – or different.

[More splashy-stomping sounds.]

MARTIN

You still haven't told me what you're doing here.

[And exactly at that moment, a phone rings. It's not the tinny, electronic sound of a cellphone – no, this is a true, heavy, classic ring.]

MARTIN

Uh. *(beat) (calling)* John? Uh, J, John – the, uh, payphone that's – here, for some reason – it's ringing?

[The Archivist doesn't respond. The phone keeps ringing.]

MARTIN

John? Is, Is that – *(to the world at large)* I-Is anyone gonna get that?!

[No one does. The phone keeps ringing. Martin takes a step in the water.]

MARTIN

Unless it's for me?

[Ring.]

[Martin sighs, one that says 'of course.']

MARTIN

(resigned) Yeah, it's for me. *(beat of indecision)* Uh –… no. *(to the phone)* N, no; I don't think so, actually! Erm, thanks, but that – that sounds like – a really – terrible idea. Hm, sorry!

[We hear him in the water. The phone stops ringing.]

MARTIN

Huh. *(pause)* …Weeell, alright then!

[The Archivist stomps over through the water towards him.]

ARCHIVIST

Martin, you need to keep up. It's not safe. *(beat) (MORE)*

Martin? You okay?

MARTIN

Uh, I – Th-th-there was a phone. *That* phone.

ARCHIVIST

(quiet surprise) Wh– Oh.

MARTIN

(overlapping) It – Yeah, it was ringing?

ARCHIVIST

(even more surprise) Oh. …Right. Did you answer it?

MARTIN

No.

ARCHIVIST

Hm. *(beat)* Probably for the best.

MARTIN

…Yeah.

[A brief beat, in which the Archivist takes a breath.]

ARCHIVIST

Let’s keep going.

MARTIN

Mm.

[They slosh on.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG164 - The Sick Village

Statement #########-4

[EXT. MID-NORTHERN UK, SOMEWHERE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[There's a barking sort of sound on repeat. The buzzing of a fly drones at that volume that's just loud enough to be an annoyance. Other bugs, too. Some unintelligible chattering in the background, high in pitch.]

[This is territory of the Corruption.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

There is a sickness in this village. Perhaps you would not see it from a distance, and the faint sting of rot on the breeze is easy enough to dismiss. But as you get closer, that infectious feeling of wrongness is harder and harder to shake.

The grass is not the green of nature, the buildings are warped by more than age, and the voices that come from behind the inhabitants' masks are hoarse and wet.

They move with exaggerated casualness, a parody of idyllic village life. And when they have a break from weeping, they reassure each

other how wonderful it is in their village, or at least how wonderful it used to be.

Each is covered from head to toe in thick black fabric, and they never, ever touch.

Take a deep breath.

The air feels thick and soupy in your lungs, swarming with a thousand contagions digging into you, begging for you to join the village:

It's so quiet there, and everyone cares for each other, far from the din and compacted flesh of the city.

In the center, a maypole stands, mildewed strips of colored cloth hanging limply from it like shreds of ragged skin. The base of the pole is ashen and charred.

The disease itself is nothing special. It begins as a small patch of discolored skin, the tiniest blemish. Scrub it off, and it is gone! For a few hours, at least. But it returns again and again, and begins to spread, a mold with tendrils that burrow deep.

It ranges in color from rancid yellow and corpse-fat white to the dull, angry purple of a fresh bruise. It itches, and burns, and you can feel it growing and spreading inside you, looking for the core of you. At least until it worms its way into your bones.

Beneath the coat of each terrified citizen of this sick village lies a lurking possibility, a nightmarish suspicion of infectious

constellations of hungry mildew, a mutating technical atlas of rotten and pockmarked flesh.

But who can know for sure? Their coats are oh, so thick.

There was never a time before the disease, no matter what the old bastards tell you. It has always been in the village, always festered in the dark corners where no one could stomach to check. Where good neighbors wouldn't dream to speculate.

But those who live here will tell you different. From behind their masks those friendly voices will tell you how it used to be: clean, and hygenic, and *always* bathed in sepia sunshine. They *know* in the guts of them this sickness has come from outside, that it is those from beyond the village that have done this to them.

***They** brought it here,* they whisper to each other in the unnamed pub, hunched and bloated over their pale and stinking beers, lifting their masks to take a mouthful, puce faces and frightened sneers exposed for just a moment.

***They** couldn't leave us well enough alone. **They** wanted what we have, our perfect peaceful life, and so they dragged their sickness here and damned us all.*

The patrons speak quietly, 'cause who can say for sure if the face behind a mask is a good, honest village face – or a sickness-bearing harbinger from beyond?

And people do still come to the village, for however thick the

paranoia, however terrible the disease, there are worse things beyond.

They are stopped, of course. Beaten and stripped and checked head to toe for any sign of infection. The village council sees to that. Most are uncontaminated, though that does little to save them, while others are already laced right through with fungus of their own.

A few are spared brutality, and treated with such cordial politeness you must have thought their inquisitors old friends. Though there seems on the surface no rhyme to such decisions, were you to look below their coats, you might see the patterns of their mold were matched.

It is, alas, those who are unblemished who suffer worst. So incomprehensible is it that any from outside could be clean, that there might be another source or vector, the inspectors devise another theory: An invisible infection. A hundred Typhoid Marys spreading mildew and decay.

They keep them in the post office, wrapped in chicken wire, prodded and jeered and watched. Should they begin to show signs of the rot, then maybe, just maybe, they can stay for now, though nobody will doubt that it was *they* brought the illness.

But if they stay clean, if they continue to act like they are better, like they are above the sickness that it is certain that they must have brought to the village, then that cannot be endured. So they

are taken to the village green, and the scorch marks at the base of the maypole get darker.

The villagers stand on the green to watch, ignoring the bending of the grass as it tries to worm its way through their boots. They watch the screaming outsider as the fire purifies them, and inside feel the gnawing panic of their own secrets.

For how long ago did they really come to the village? How deep did their roots go? Do any of them truly remember? What if *they* are an outsider? What if they're found out?

No. Such fears are to be quashed and swallowed; they must stand strong; they must stand together as one body against the mass of those beyond the village who would see them degraded and destroyed. They cannot allow such secret terrors to break their unity.

And the maypole watches over all.

There is no house in town that has not found itself marked with the red cross of plague, but paint is fleeting and the villagers are *so* desperate to hide their state. Night still falls here, if only to give those that wish it a chance to try and hide their frantic denials.

As the weak dawn breaks, you may count the doors now painted white, and see who is more conscientious in covering their spongy skin.

The deception is pitiable, and yet deep down every villager knows

the mold has marked them *deeper* than any of the others, and carries it as their most secret shame.

Foremost in their denials are the village council, those loud and hardy souls who have taken it upon themselves to police this place, to safeguard their *traditions* and denounce the infection that is the right and proper punishment of those who would allow the village borders to be breached, and their ancient way of life to be compromised.

Their masks are blue and red and white, and their coats are the color of fresh ivory, stained sometimes with streaks of crimson from their dutiful ministrations. None would dare accuse them of infection, and to cross them or draw their eye is to invite the strongest diagnosis.

Head of the council is Jillian Smith. Her father's father's father's father's father built the maypole, carved from a jackalberry tree and painted in the colors of the village. This place is her home and her right and her duty, and woe to any fungus-riddled outsider who might believe it otherwise.

For no one would speak up if Jillian Smith were to mark you infected or declare you foreign. No one would lift a finger as they dragged you to the green.

Her gloves are purest white and never sullied, and they hide a cerulean mold that covers every inch of her, through skin, muscle, and organ, though she has no idea it runs so deep.

By night, she sits in the quiet darkness of her perfect cottage, peeling herself with a straight razor, layer by layer, desperate to reach the pure flesh she is so sure must still be in there, somewhere.

Her living room is the same suffocation blue as the rest of her, every surface piled high with her own discarded bloody skin, and she has no terror deeper than the thought she might be discovered. As she pulls spongy strips free one agonizing fiber at a time, she stares from the window at the house of her neighbor, Mrs Kim.

Mrs Kim is not on the village council. Mrs Kim keeps to herself. And Jillian Smith is certain Mrs Kim is not infected, and *hates* her for it.

What Mrs Kim is, is scared. Scared of her neighbors, scared of her friends, scared of the moment when someone will smell the spreading patch of darkness on her back, and decide she is infected, or remember she has only been in the village since her grandfather's day, and judge her to be an outsider.

Should she accuse someone else? Send them to the village green? Perhaps she might petition to join the village council, though that would invite their attention as much as anything might.

Even through the masks, Mrs Kim knows the looks she gets in the pub. But what can she do?

When she hears the shouts outside and sees the smoke pouring from the thatch roof, she knows it is too late.

They drag her to the maypole, their masks hiding the tears of terror

and angry shame, and lash her there with those strips of cloth that never seem to burn.

Mrs Kim does not fight, though she screams and screams and screams as all her fears are realized. Jillian Smith tries to smile as she watches her neighbor burn, but the fungus is too thick around her lips, and her face no longer moves.

As the flames consume the last of Mrs Kim in thick and acrid smoke, the mold reaches the bones of Jillian Smith, and she *blooms*.

In a moment she is swollen, bloated, bursting into a cloud of violet spores that envelop the green and those who dwell there, embracing them in a rot that long since seeped into the soil of this blighted land.

[The Archivist takes a deep breath and then exhales.]

ARCHIVIST

(softly) Okay. *(heavy inhale)* End recording.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[EXT. MID-NORTHERN UK, SOMEWHERE BEYOND THE CORRUPTION VILLAGE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The sounds of the Corruption are in the distance now, though the fly in particular still manages to stick out.]

ARCHIVIST

We're *fine*.

MARTIN

A-Are we? I mean, that place is – *(sputters)* I don't, I don't feel fine, okay, and you were there a *long* time doing your,y– *(how to phrase this?)* – your guidebook, which, you know, I get it, but that place is –

[Some movement.]

MARTIN

I,It's *infectious,* and… I don't –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) We're *not* infected, Martin; that place – *(stop, exhale)* It isn't *for* us.

MARTIN

A, Alright – but how do you *know?* –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) I just – *Do.* I just know it.

[Silence. Some movement.]

MARTIN

You've been Knowing a lot, lately.

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

A lot more than you used to.

ARCHIVIST

Ye…Yeah.

[By now, we can no longer hear the sounds of the Corruption's village, just the standard howling wind of this universe's fearscape.]

ARCHIVIST

And it, and it feels more – deliberate. Like I have more control now.

MARTIN

Okay.

[A step.]

MARTIN

So – How much can you see? What else do you know?

ARCHIVIST

Uhh… *(step, genuine surprise)* Maybe everything.

MARTIN

What'd'you mean, "everything?"

ARCHIVIST

I don't – Ask me a question! One I can't possibly know already.

MARTIN

O-kay… *(step)* What's my middle name?

[The Archivist *hms*. His static begins to rise.]

ARCHIVIST

(!) Y– You don't have one!

MARTIN

(impressed) Whoa.

ARCHIVIST

You – I actually *believed* you!

[The static starts to fade.]

MARTIN

(overlapping) Oh – S-Sorry; sorry, I just, I just wanted to try it out-

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) “That’s ridiculous,” I thought, “That’s not a real name, but he wouldn’t *lie* to me.”

MARTIN

(caught red-handed) Okay – okay, okay, okay. Let’s – Let’s try something a little bigger, then.

ARCHIVIST

Alright.

[Step.]

MARTIN

Is Basira alive?

[The Archivist inhales sharply.]

MARTIN

Is she in – o,one of these places?

[The static rises, quicker than before.]

ARCHIVIST

She's alive. Out there, not trapped in a, in a, a hellscape, but – moving. Hunting.

She's – She's looking for Daisy. She's a few steps behind.

MARTIN

And Daisy?

[Static intensifies.]

ARCHIVIST

…Beastial. Brutal. Carving her way through the domains of other Powers, following the scent of blood –

[He sighs, and there's a note of – guilt? Regret? Pity? To it.]

ARCHIVIST

Oh, Daisy, I'm sorry.

MARTIN

What's Basira going to do?

ARCHIVIST

She – *(movement)* – *thinks* she's going to kill Daisy. Like she promised. But she's conflicted.

MARTIN

(immediate) And will she?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know; th-the future, th, th,that's… not something I can see.

MARTIN

O-kay, good to know. How much further do we still need to go?

ARCHIVIST

A long way.

[The static kicks back up into a higher register. When the Archivist speaks, his voice is closer to his Statement Voice – lower register, more distanced from what he's saying, like a narrator.]

ARCHIVIST

Through many dark and awful places.

MARTIN

(catching the change) Is this – A-Are you okay? How are you feeling?

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) I – Um, I, I'm okay. It's a little – strange? But it doesn't hurt.

Keep going; you have – questions, let's hear them.

MARTIN

Oh, oh, okay, um. How are the others?

ARCHIVIST

I, uh. *(pause) Hm.* I'm – I'm not – sure. I can't really see Melanie, or, or Georgie.

MARTIN

They're dead?

ARCHIVIST

No, no – I, I don't think so; if they were dead, I – I think I *would* know that, I just – *(rustling)* I don't know – where they are, w,what they're doing.

MARTIN

Hm.

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) London, maybe?

MARTIN

What about Elias?

ARCHIVIST

(immediate, darker) He's inside the Panopticon. The tower, far above the world.

MARTIN

(joke) That one?

ARCHIVIST

(misses/doesn't care for it) Yes.

[He sighs.]

MARTIN

(as if asking after an old friend) How is he?

ARCHIVIST

Hard to say. The, The way this works, this – new sight, the knowledge is, is… *(sigh)* somehow wrapped up in the Panopticon? *(sigh)* An eye can't – see inside itself.

[Martin *hm*s.]

ARCHIVIST

But I can feel him in there.

MARTIN

Hm. That sounds… *gross.*

ARCHIVIST

It is.

[They both laugh.]

MARTIN

Are we safe, traveling like this?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. *(brief pause)* Yes, sort of, we're – *(exhale)* I don't know how to phrase it, we're – something between a pilgrim and a moth. We can walk through these little worlds of terror, watching them. Separate, and untouched.

MARTIN

That's *not* as comforting as you might think.

[He gives a little laugh as he says it. The Archivist laughs with his next words, too.]

ARCHIVIST

I like it better than the alternative.

MARTIN

Fair point! *(small laugh)* Okay, okay, uh – what else, what else, um… Oh! Um, uh, who was – um, uh – phone! Who was calling me?

[The Archivist's static comes noticeably back in.]

ARCHIVIST

(inhale) …I *think* it was Annabelle Cane.

MARTIN

Hm.

ARCHIVIST

That's – weird; I – I know the Web was wrapped around that phone, but, but I can't – see her. A, At all. At least with Georgie and Melanie I have a vague sense they're still alive, i-in London, and o– well, what *was* London.

But Annabelle? Nothing.

MARTIN

Hm. W, Well, I'll… I'll ask her, next time she calls.

ARCHIVIST

(amused) Well, I *know* **that's** a bad idea.

MARTIN

(overlapping, fond, amused) What, do you?

ARCHIVIST

…Okay, no; that one was a – very *reasonable* guess.

MARTIN

Ha!

ARCHIVIST

(inhale) Anything else? I'll, I'll be honest, I'm starting to feel a bit – self-conscious being a post-apocalyptic Google?

MARTIN

Okay, okay, just one more, but – it's a big one.

ARCHIVIST

(near-whisper) Okay.

[Movement, possibly the flip of a page.]

MARTIN

Can we turn the world back?

[The static takes *off*.]

ARCHIVIST

Whoa. Um. I-If the fears are removed, y,yes, but they c-can't be destroyed while there are still people to fear them, th-then they can't be banished back to the space where they came from; it,it's not – *there* anymore, I, – ***Oh,*** *uh* –

MARTIN

J,J,Jo,J,John, what's wrong?!

ARCHIVIST

Uh, i-it's, uh – I'm sorry – trying to know things about them directly, i,i,it's like – *(exhale)* God, it's like looking into the Sun.

MARTIN

Okay, okay, okay. Alright, that's alright. We can leave it.

[The Archivist exhales as he speaks.]

ARCHIVIST

Good. *(inhale) Ow.*

[He sighs.]

MARTIN

Hey. *(small chuckle)* Hey, it's okay, it's okay. We'll go slow for a while.

ARCHIVIST

Alright.

MARTIN

Yeah. Yeah, there's no rush.

[Pause as the Archivist sighs.]

MARTIN

Oh, actually – what about Helen, where's *she* these days?

[Static kicks in again.]

ARCHIVIST

Uh – She's –

[He laughs, dryly.]

ARCHIVIST

Right. Naturally.

[He sighs.]

MARTIN

What's she doing?

ARCHIVIST

Martin, turn around.

[We hear him do just that.]

MARTIN

(fuck off) Oh, you're *kidding.*

ARCHIVIST

Wish I was!

MARTIN

(sigh) Shall we… um…

ARCHIVIST

Do you want to do the honors?

MARTIN

(grimace) Not *really!*

[One of them knocks, a little knock-knock-knock.]

MARTIN

Maybe – no one's home? –

HELEN

(overlapping) Hello, John!

[We hear her footsteps as she steps outside. They're not on any gravel-type surface like Martin's and the Archivist's; instead they sound like she's walking on wood or tile.]

ARCHIVIST

(sighing) How did you find us?

HELEN

Oh! I thought you'd know everything by this point.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I suppose I do.

[There's a definite note of amusement in his voice. Helen laughs, in that disorienting way of hers. The Archivist allows a small *hm*.]

MARTIN

(still here!) And I don't! So, care to enlighten me?

ARCHIVIST

Oh – yes, sorry, uh – The Distortion can always find anyone who has – crossed its threshold.

HELEN

And that includes *you*, Martin! Remember? And please – my name is Helen.

ARCHIVIST

Like you said, I can know everything now, including how much of a lie that really is.

HELEN

Don't mistake *complication* for *falsehood*, **dear** Archivist. And remember, that knowledge is not the same thing as understanding!

ARCHIVIST

What do you want.

HELEN

To say hello! And check up on the happy couple.

[She laughs again.]

HELEN

I always knew you crazy kids would make it work.

[The Archivist sighs as she speaks.]

MARTIN

Thanks.

ARCHIVIST

Martin. (to Helen) Look, I've no interest in your – gloating.

HELEN

(picture of innocence) What would *I* have to gloat about? Much as I am *delighted* by this brave new world in which we find ourselves, I can take no credit for it. This was *all* – **you**!

ARCHIVIST

(immediate) You could have – *(inhale, reigning in)* You knew what was happening.

HELEN

I suspected. But all *I* really did was refuse to help! And that is hardly a unique quality.

[Another sigh from the Archivist at her words.]

HELEN

If that makes it *my* fault, then surely this is *Georgie's* fault as well, and *Melanie's* –

ARCHIVIST

Leave them out of this, they didn't know!

HELEN

There it is again! Knowledge! It's so very important to you, isn't it? These fossilized nuggets of pretend comprehension, weighing you down, stopping you thinking or feeling! What about hypotheticals? If they had known, what would they have done?

Is that something you can see?

ARCHIVIST

What. Do. You. Want!

HELEN

To be friends again! All three of us.

[Another sigh.]

HELEN

Look at this place, look at this – *(inhales deeply) Wonderland*.

This is the world, now, and we are strong and free! There's really no reason for us not to hang out.

[A pause, silent but for the hollow ring of Helen's tone and static.]

HELEN

(to Martin) (exhale) Goodness, he *is* in a mood. Has he been like this the whole time?

MARTIN

Not the – *whole* time.

HELEN

Thank goodness.

ARCHIVIST

Martin…

MARTIN

In fairness, he's had a lot on.

HELEN

(sympathetic) Oh, I'm sure.

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Martin… *please*.

MARTIN

Sorry, it's just – maybe she can help!

ARCHIVIST

With *what.*

MARTIN

With our – With our, with our quest!

[The Archivist sighs.]

MARTIN

We've been walking a while, and well, her *door's* – maybe we could, you know – shortcut!

ARCHIVIST

No. No, I don't think that's a good idea.

HELEN

I would *happily* take him. But I don't think he'd want to leave you.

MARTIN

Okay, *o,one – (hm)* Don't talk about me like I'm not here; it's – rude. Two, I *know* you can take two people at once. Me and Tim were both inside the corridors when it –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Martin, it's not that si-simple.

HELEN

I'm afraid the Archivist is *too* powerful now.

[A sigh through teeth.]

HELEN

If he tried to travel through my corridors it would *not* go well, for any of us.

ARCHIVIST

But mainly for you.

HELEN

(pleasant surprise) Ooo! Is that a threat?

ARCHIVIST

No.

HELEN

Mm, pity!

MARTIN

So, no shortcuts then. *(sigh)* Understood. *(to John)* I'm not leaving you on your own.

HELEN

Oh! Such devotion. *(to John)* You really don't deserve it. But of

course – you know that already!

[She laughs.]

HELEN

Oh, this is nice! I am really glad we get to spend some proper, *quality* time together now.

MARTIN

…Yeah.

HELEN

Anyway. Sorry to love you and leave you, but I must dash. It's a very busy time for me, lots of things to *do,* people to – well. You know!

ARCHIVIST

I don't doubt it.

[Tenuous pause.]

MARTIN

…What?

HELEN

Just taking a moment to look. You two are just *such* an adorable

couple –

ARCHIVIST

Enough.

[Helen opens her door.]

HELEN

See you soon!

[We hear her footsteps as she walks into her corridors. The door swings shut behind her. The Archivist sighs yet again.]

MARTIN

(a bit sing-song) Maybe she's right!

ARCHIVIST

I am *not*, nor have I ever *been,* "adorable."

MARTIN

(pfft) Okay, *not* true. But I actually meant the whole – being friends thing? I mean, I don't see why –

ARCHIVIST

Martin, she's – a cruel, vicious monster!

MARTIN

Yes. Yes, she is. But who else is there?

[One last sigh from the Archivist.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG165 - Revolutions

Statement ########-5

[EXT. SOMEWHERE IN THE UK, A DIVISION OF THE STRANGER]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Immediately we hear the howling ruckus and music of a circus. It's almost like we're in the Unknowing again.]

MARTIN

Wow.

ARCHIVIST

I told you.

MARTIN

I mean, yeah, but when you said big –

ARCHIVIST

I meant *big.*

MARTIN

Yeah, but – I mean, how big is it, actually?

[A little *heh* as he says it.]

ARCHIVIST

I-It doesn't really work like that.

MARTIN

Yeah, figures.

ARCHIVIST

If you tried to measure the diameter, I – uh – it'd probably only be a half mile or so.

But the curve doesn't work quite right, and if you stayed in the same spot and just – hopped on a horse and let it carry you 'round, it – might be… *days* before you passed the same spot, or, uh…

[There are distant screams – of joy? Of fear? It's hard to tell – in the background as he speaks.]

MARTIN

(overlapping) Or you might never see the same spot again?

ARCHIVIST

(exhale) Exactly.

MARTIN

Yeah. *(sigh)* I think I'm starting to get it.

ARCHIVIST

Good.

MARTIN

But – you said we needed to go *through* these places. Is that even gonna work here?

ARCHIVIST

(squeaky breath) Uh – We need to go through them… *metaphorically*. Psychologically, we need to experience them.

[Something screams in the background.]

MARTIN

Hm. (slowly) You think we could – get – that experience just – walking along the edge? Because, uh – I really don't like the look of those riders.

ARCHIVIST

Would you believe me if I said they were the victims?

MARTIN

At this point, I'm not even *surprised*.

ARCHIVIST

Either way, best not to actually climb onto the thing if we can help it.

MARTIN

Fine by me. (laugh) Never really liked merry-go-rounds anyway.

ARCHIVIST

No? You – gone on any recently?

MARTIN

What? No. No, I don't think so. Not since I was a kid.

ARCHIVIST

(heh) I actually, uh… There's one at London Zoo – uh, was one at London Zoo. Big old thing. Went quite fast, actually. Su-Surprisingly thrilling.

[As he says this, we hear Martin trying to contain his mirth. As soon as the Archivist finishes speaking, he lets out a large burst of laughter.]

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

Seriously?!

ARCHIVIST

It was years back, before the Institute. I… I was in a weird place.

Had a good time, though!

[Martin laughs again, in surprised delight.]

MARTIN

Well.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, obviously I wouldn't want to ride *this one;* we've got quite enough thrills already.

MARTIN

(teasing) You – Are you sure? I could speak to an attendant –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) I would advise – *(softer)* against doing that.

MARTIN

So you said the riders were the victims… where's the monster?

ARCHIVIST

I'm hoping if we're quick we can avoid her notice.

MARTIN

Her? *(pause)* J-John, please don't tell me there's an evil clown doll down there, because –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) No. N-No, Nikola died with the Unknowing; it's, uh… *(shaky inhale)* an old friend.

MARTIN

(realizing) …Oh.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. I'd really rather not deal with her if we can avoid it.

MARTIN

Yeah, good call. Um – in that case, do you want to – do your thing now, then, before we start moving? Uh, are we close enough?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Yes, I-I think so. Good idea.

MARTIN

Thanks.

ARCHIVIST

You, uh. You might want to take a bit of a walk. This – feels like a strange one.

MARTIN

What does – "strange" mean, with something like this?

ARCHIVIST

Don't think you want to know.

MARTIN

Good point! Um, okay, well, uh – good luck; I'll be, uh – over there.

[We hear him walk off.]

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[Immediately, his static kicks in.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Your face is not your face is not your face around the curling carousel it twists in place to take from you and all the tattered stolen souls who sense of *me* is swollen and distended into nothing.

Round and round and round it goes and when it deigns to stop who

you might be you cannot know, so touch and feel the skin atop your skull to test the limits and extremities of where this canvas comes to rest, in robbed identities and peeling names that you could swear were never yours.

[In the background, someone screams.]

The music swells through you. The music vomits from you. The music calls a name that through the tears of half-grasped memories seems almost and eternally familiar.

So dance. Dance to the beat of the thump of the chase of the still and plastic horse hooves which cannot break from where they are secured by bolts and glue and eggshell-thin reality that paints a visage of sense almost enough to tell you that the nausea that swells and pushes at the limits of your mind is incorrect.

There's nothing wrong.

The world in which the carousel will twirl is not the hollow hell you fear; it is the world. Just the world. A world where if you'd wished to have a name it must be stolen, carved and pulled full-bloody from the frame of others who would wish in vain to hold their selfness close.

You want a face? Take it. There are so many here, and those who cannot hold them, well, whoever chose to give them such a gift must take the blame, knowing they could never keep it in a world of so much thieving strangeness.

And soon enough they will forget they ever even had one, rest assured; it's best to step the dance and keep your face secured as much as you are able. Just. Keep. Running.

[More screams.]

Your feet – or are they just the shoes with emptiness within? – will pound upon the creaking wood of carousel-top, or perhaps the only ground there's ever been, so struggle not to look behind, though – can you trust your eyes to tell you quite what it might be that dogs your steps and see the poor procession of those gory, faceless wretches who have lost possession now of all their treasured wants, identities to those who are now them?

Like you.

You tire of the chase of course, the fire and all-relentless pace of competition reaching for a name, identity, and face that has long since worn through all reserves of hard, enduring vigor in you. Yet still you only stay a self while willing on your aching legs that feel like breaking just to keep you forward of the frenzied fray of hazy clawed *who are you*s.

So run. Just run, and listen to the music of your panicked flight from those who long to take what you have stole from those no longer worth a name.

Ever-onwards-forward on the curling path of merry-go-round that's twisted, wound, and spinning in its harrowing sound of organ-

piping-circus-tunes that merrily hound the steps of your escape.

Could you turn a thought and burn your lead on your pursuers, an angle change a charge now perpendicular to your intended line of best retreat, and stake it all on one last hope, your bruised feet pounding to the edge?

The boundary. Don't stop the ride, but you still want to get off.

But no, for all the dreams of bounding, leaping off into the great unknown, you see the ring of broken mewling wretches who have shown the sting that comes with such rejection of the truth, so seldom spoken yet inside you all- that there is *no way off the merry-go-round*.

And so perhaps the twirling round that pushes all who passenger the carousel might help you stay ahead, and so you seize the rough and peeling pole of ancient wooden horse, ignore the sloughing, screaming wood that comes away in clumps, and grip the saddle hard, in hands that should be clean but now have never seen a day they were not caked in glue and slaked with blood of all the robberies existence deems the only way to live.

Ride away. Just ride away.

Up it goes. Down it comes.

[That same shrill girl's scream.]

Hold fast to the joy of the rise, despise all thoughts you might

descend. And in the end, protest against that fall back down to painted wooden spinning earth, with all the tear-streaked grasping of the mass of gasping, still-unnamed oppressed.

Cry to the horse, *Go higher! Faster,* offer painted apples that you think perhaps it might desire, but the frozen face is still the same, the simple cast of equine terror, framed and caught in wood and plastic bulging eyes of fear.

Its pace remaining as it ever was; it does not care for coming pains as you are torn.

Doesn't it know who you are?

No.

And soon, neither will you. *(shaky breath)* Although to call it "all is lost" is more dramatic, yes, than has been earned. For those upon this carousel who have not been you already, perhaps they know without a memory how good it is to have a face and name.

It's not the *same* as what *you* had when first you climbed the brightly painted stairs, but not the worst who you have been. And as the horse drops through the air into the crowd of eager, waiting thieves you are unbowed and, yes, afraid, but still the music plays, and turns the world upon its gaudy axis.

You will be someone again, someday.

The hands and fingers reach and breach the gentle veiled complacency and respite that had just been yours upon your

mount's ascent, and now the wood is bent and bowed as faceless things who long to be a *who* pull splinters from the rot of screaming saddle and of rider.

You, who feels the mask of sharp and hard identity begin its gentle fracture into jagged shards of names that you once were.

I'm still Hannah! you try to scream, but are you? No. Perhaps there's some Veronica as fragments there, or Julian, or Anya, but – no. You feel the last of names and who you might have been be torn away and borne towards new bodies. New pages, blank, determined to be people.

The rotten, ragged rush of fetid fingernails that dig and push and reach around the edges of your face until they scrape against the bone in such a rough, scratched tone, that rocks and echoes through the space that was your mind, and when they peel it from you, like the skin of an orange, the skin of an apple, the skin of a pig, the skin of a child, the skin of a *you,* then comes the briefest flash that surely now it's done, so much perhaps the pain will be somewhat lessened.

There's no way it could hurt as much as you remember.

But it does, and so, of course, you scream and scream and curses foul, obscene will tumble garbled over where there once sat other people's lips or yours now gone and teeth that once shone yellowed ivory are crimson in the flowing sanguine flood.

And as you lie in agonies and fading dreams of personhood, of

knowing who you were and what that might have meant, you hear the bitter whisper of recriminating seekers who have found the treasure of their eager dreams, but see, it seems there's not enough. For all.

And so they fall to frantic tearing conflict, just as vicious as it was when it was bearing down on you. You lie there in the fugue of vivid pain and feel that gentle rain from violence overhead; some fall dead, or close as this place lets you lie, for – truly thus to die would be too eager an escape, and listen to the ebb and swell of slow, melodic wail that well you know conducts the flowing rhythm laced into this endless, faceless dance.

At last, a victor breaks away in clinging heartfelt terror of his former comrades, sprinting bold and holding to his skull the severed face that was once yours. Willing it to stick as those who notice try to pick themselves back up and give pursuit to close the gap.

Perhaps you should arise and follow on the things that once you would despise but now have joined. You are, of course, a faceless thing as well, and so should quickly match the pace of those who chase the self-same prey.

But now it is too late; they've gone. Their chase will not abate until their former friend is ripped apart in turn. And you have learned to wait.

For there are many faces out upon the carousel, and many names that you might be. So bide your time a while and wait the coming

of another one whose fate and face might sit upon your grinning carmine skull.

So turn with the turn of the merry-go-round and dance to its jolly old song. Who will you be, with a name or three, and a stranger's face worn wrong?

ARCHIVIST

End recording.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[EXT. THE DIVISION OF THE STRANGER]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[We still hear the circus music, loud and clear, along with a scream or two every now and then. The Archivist and Martin are still walking through the Stranger's domain.]

MARTIN

You're joking!

ARCHIVIST

(amused) I'm not.

[Brief pause.]

MARTIN

So was it any *good?*

ARCHIVIST

Uh – what do you mean?

MARTIN

Was it a good poem?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know! No? You're the poetry expert, Martin, not me.

MARTIN

Well – did it *stir* any feeling in you?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, **nausea**! Because of the horrible things in it.

MARTIN

That's not *quite* what I meant.

ARCHIVIST

(laughing) Then I don't know what you mean, Martin; I'm not a poetry person, I don't – *get* it. I never have.

MARTIN

(long-suffering) That's – That's fine; I understand.

ARCHIVIST

Look, I'm better than I was. I used to think all poetry was bad.

MARTIN

Sorry, *what?*

ARCHIVIST

I mean, I just thought of – *(small puff of a sigh)* I sort of thought it was pointless. Just – *(inhale)* write some prose, and stop – wasting everyone's time.

MARTIN

(thoughtful) Hm. What changed?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know, I just – mellowed on it, I suppose.

MARTIN

That's – kind of weird.

ARCHIVIST

In my defense, there is a lot of bad poetry out there.

MARTIN

I guess?

[Brief moment of silence as they walk.]

MARTIN

I kinda want to *hear* that tape now, see how artistic the Stranger actually is.

ARCHIVIST

Or just look up. *(sigh)* See it for yourself.

MARTIN

Uh – *(heh)* No, no thanks. Trying to avoid thinking about it, actually.

[A very large, shrill girl's scream.]

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) Of course. Sorry.

MARTIN

How much further?

ARCHIVIST

I think we're past the worst of –

[A strange almost-musical humming sound.]

ARCHIVIST

(quiet) Ah.

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

She's here.

[We hear a static begin to come in, rising quickly. It gets shimmery quick, holding a high quavering tone that belongs to something *familiar*. Under it:]

MARTIN

(quiet) Oh *no*.

NOT!SASHA

(heh) My *dearest* colleagues.

MARTIN

Just – get back!

[A thump, like he's trying to hit it with something.]

NOT!SASHA

I can't believe you'd decide to pass through my neighborhood and not say hello to *dear, old Sasha.*

ARCHIVIST

Just ignore it, Martin.

NOT!SASHA

Oh, you *wound* me, Archivist. And we used to be *so close.*

ARCHIVIST

I have nothing to say to you.

NOT!SASHA

Nothing to say! Well, you crush me, bury me in the foundations of your little temple for a year, and now you have nothing to say?

ARCHIVIST

Leitner did that. And Peter released you. All I've done to you is to *not die*.

NOT!SASHA

Oh, and I would say that is quite rude enough.

ARCHIVIST

Leave us alone. I *won't* warn you again.

NOT!SASHA

And what if I let *you* choose this time? Which one of you would I wear next? Martin looks *very* comfortable, positively *roomy*. Oh, wouldn't you agree, Archivist?

MARTIN

John, do we – do we need to run?

NOT!SASHA

Oh, yes, Martin. You very much do. I'll even give you a head start!

[A pause. And then we realize the Archivist is *laughing*.]

MARTIN

…John?

[The Archivist begins to walk towards the Not!Sasha]

ARCHIVIST

You're bold, I'll give you that.

NOT!SASHA

(hissing) Last chance.

ARCHIVIST

Desperate for one last morsel of terror from us?

[The Not!Sasha snarls.]

ARCHIVIST

(amused) A final sip, and then we're gone? Somehow we manage to keep just ahead of you and get away.

[It breathes out heavily, more angry huff than exhale.]

ARCHIVIST

God forbid you actually catch us.

[Its anger grows.]

ARCHIVIST

Doesn't bear thinking about.

MARTIN

John, what are you *talking about?*

ARCHIVIST

She *can't touch us*.

[The Not!Sasha continues to make noises of anger, growling and snarling and huffing like a bull.]

ARCHIVIST

We're so far beyond her now. She's just like everything else here: ruled by the Eye. *(slight laugh)* And she *hates* it.

[The Not!Sasha lets out something like a roar and begins talking: fast, angry, no hint of the syrupy sweetness from before.]

NOT!SASHA

Well of *course* you want to wallow in my *shame* like your voyeur master.

[That strange musical hum comes in again over her words.]

NOT!SASHA

Do you know how it *feels?* To be – anonymous? And yet **known**! To have all the sweetest dread I can create tainted by the relentless gaze of that damned Eye. I've suffered enough.

ARCHIVIST

Pathetic.

[A clinking, shuffling sort of sound; he shoulders his bag.]

ARCHIVIST

Martin, let's go.

NOT!SASHA

Not as pathetic as your little friend when I *ate* her life.

[A drawn, dangerous pause.]

[The Archivist takes a step back to face it.]

ARCHIVIST

(low, deadly) What did you say?

[The Not!Sasha does not respond. A soft static bursts in, just in the background; instead, the Not!Sasha draws a sharp breath.]

NOT!SASHA

I-I'm sorry.

[In the background, the circus music shifts key, higher.]

MARTIN

John?

ARCHIVIST

You were wrong, you know.

[The static rises. The Not!Sasha cries out in pain, small, whimpering sounds. The Archivist's voice and gaze are relentless.]

ARCHIVIST

There is more suffering than you can ever experience, so much more. The horror of your victims, their constant, senseless agony.

[The static builds and builds and builds over his words, the Not!Sasha forced to drink it in, crying out as the terror floods it.]

ARCHIVIST

Feel it now. *Understand* it. You have drawn out so much despair, and now *finally,* it's your turn.

[The static reaches its upper register, the most scrambled of its tones. This isn't the Archivist's typical static; it doesn't take an angelic quality. It's squeaky, variable, similar to how Peter Lukas's static sounded. It is stronger, *harsher*.]

[The Not!Sasha is sobbing.]

ARCHIVIST

Ceaseless Watcher, turn your gaze upon this wretched thing.

[The static pushes at the edges; it bounces, thumps, throbs in the ear. A new, lower-register segment has arrived; it sounds rather like a drill bit. This is the sort of static that, if louder and more intense, could blow out speakers, put pressure on the eardrum.]

NOT!SASHA

No! No, please, no!

[The static mounts and swells and *bursts*. It sounds like a glitch, like something wrongly heard.]

[The Not!Sasha screams a final wavering and distorted *No!* and then fades.]

[The static lingers briefly, but fades quickly after.]

MARTIN

(impressed) Who-a-oa.

ARCHIVIST

(quiet, drained) I, uh –

MARTIN

What was *that?!*

ARCHIVIST

I, I destroyed it. K-Killed her.

MARTIN

(a cross between pride and glee – hurrah!) Are you kidding me? You – you *obliterated* her! You – you *smote* her!

ARCHIVIST

(mumbling) We should go.

MARTIN

What about the merry-go-round? With her gone, is it – is it still the –

ARCHIVIST

(snapping) I don't know!

MARTIN

Yes, you do!

ARCHIVIST

I, I don't – want to know; pl– We need to go. *Please.*

[We hear one of them grab at bags.]

MARTIN

(surprise) Oh, oh, okay, a-alright, alright, lead on!

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG166 – The Worms

Statement ########-6

[EXT. SOMEWHERE IN THE UK, NEAR A DIVISION OF THE BURIED]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Footsteps, crunchy as if on gravel. A strange dog-like howling in the distance.]

[The Archivist inhales and exhales deeply.]

MARTIN

…So, are we going to talk about it, or….?

[The Archivist exhales, and then stops walking; we hear the jangle of his bag(s) as he does so. Martin follows suit.]

ARCHIVIST

(with a sigh) What's to talk about?

MARTIN

What happened back there? What you did to Sa–

[He cuts himself off.]

[A pause.]

ARCHIVIST

Go on. Say it.

MARTIN

What you did to… that *thing*.

ARCHIVIST

I – killed it. I – finally have the power, so I killed it.

MARTIN

Yeah, but like *how?* I'm – I'm sorry, I just don't understand what *actually* happened.

ARCHIVIST

I – It's hard to put into words, loo-l– *(sigh)* Look, can we talk about it later, we're – *(inhale)* coming to a – *(sigh)* domain of the Buried, and I would *really* rather –

[A knock-knock.]

[A vague static crackles in the background, simple, all one classic tone.]

MARTIN

Did you…?

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

Look down, Martin.

MARTIN

Oh.

(realizes) Wait, what?

ARCHIVIST

Don't… get too close.

[The door creaks open.]

ARCHIVIST

Hello, Helen.

HELEN

Oh, *hello!* In a better mood, are we?

(lower, teasing) Feeling more secure now you've learned how to kill?

[As she speaks, a shimmery, high-pitched sound starts to layer over the background.]

ARCHIVIST

(inhale) Something like that.

MARTIN

Will *you* tell me how he did it?

ARCHIVIST

Martin…

MARTIN

He just keeps going all *vague* about it.

HELEN

Oh, goodness. You see what you've done to the poor boy, John? He's coming to *me* for clear answers.

[She snorts, and it turns into her trademark laugh.]

ARCHIVIST

Shut up.

HELEN

(giggle) It's very satisfying though, isn't it? Teasing out vague

information? You see why Elias got a kick out of it.

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) ***Shut UP!***

MARTIN

John.

HELEN

You're right – Martin. He is tetchy.

MARTIN

(overlapping) I didn't say he was te–

HELEN

(overlapping) So, so, an explanation. From little old me.

[Pause.]

HELEN

D'you mind, John?

[The Archivist inhales, starts to say something, then cuts himself off, sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

(fine, whatever) Go right ahead.

HELEN

We're *all* here, Martin. The Stranger, the Buried, the Desolation, all of us. But the *Eye* still rules. All this fear is being performed for *its benefit.*

And so, there are now exactly *two* roles available in this new world of ours: The Watcher, and the Watched. Subject, and object. Those who are feared, and those who are afraid.

And *John,* well – he is part of the Eye. A ***very*** important part. And he's able to, shall we say, shift its focus. Turn the one into the other.

And for those of us whose very existence relies on being feared, well: to be turned into a victim destroys us utterly. And very, *very* painfully.

ARCHIVIST

Enough.

HELEN

Yes, I suspect so.

MARTIN

Sure. Okay, that's – I mean, that's *really* not that complicated, John; I don't see why you were being so *coy* about it –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Because I'm *ashamed*, Martin.

[Slight pause.]

MARTIN

Ashamed?!

ARCHIVIST

Yes! Ashamed of the fact that I just – destroyed the world and have been *rewarded* for it, the fact that – I can walk safe through all this horror I've created like a… *fucking tourist*, destroying whoever I please. The fact that I… enjoyed it, and… the fact that there are so many others that I want to revenge myself on!

[He exhales heavily after his monologue.]

MARTIN

…No; No, I actually think you're good on that front.

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

Yeah, I, I, I think we should go for it, get our murder on!

ARCHIVIST

(disbelief) Sorry, *what?*

HELEN

(surprised delight) Yes, Martin!

MARTIN

(overlapping slightly) Th, This isn't like it was before! We're not talking about innocent bystanders in cafes here, John; these things are – th-they're just *evil*, plain and simple, and right now they're torturing and tormenting *everyone!*

(pause for breath) If you want to stop them and have the power to, then – then, then *yeah,* let's do it, let's go full *Kill Bill*!

ARCHIVIST

I – I, I haven't seen it.

HELEN

Oh, Martin, I am *so* proud of you. Can I come?

ARCHIVIST, MARTIN

(in unison) No.

HELEN

So that's a strong "maybe" then?

[The Archivist sighs, long and heavy.]

ARCHIVIST

(under his breath) Ow.

[He lets out a small exhale of pain.]

MARTIN

John? Are you…?

ARCHIVIST

We've been – close for too long, I, I need, uh – You might want to take a walk.

MARTIN

Hm.

HELEN

And I'll take *that* as my cue. Well, I'll see you avenging angels later; don't be strangers.

[She laughs, her door closes, and she's gone.]

MARTIN

Do you need anything?

[The Archivist exhales.]

ARCHIVIST

No.

MARTIN

Fine, I'll just –

[A sound like he's shouldering his bag.]

MARTIN

Er, yeah, right.

[He walks a distance away. The Archivist exhales, puffing his cheeks.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Down, down, *down*, down, down below the earth, there was a worm. He had not always been a worm, of course, but time and tide and life had pushed him to it.

His name, he dimly recalled, was Sam, and he was, as definitely always had been the case, trapped. Boarded on all sides with no escape and no recourse.

Even in his faint and fading memories of a life that wasn't simply

stone and rancid, reeking soil, he wasn't sure he'd ever known a thing that might be called freedom.

Choices he had had, that's true, and certainly compared to the relentless press of all the weight and dirt now on him, the simple choice of *left* or *right* or *stand* or *sit* would now seem the most outrageous of luxuries.

But at the time, there was no joy in such decisions, for though he could point his feet left, it was a rightward turn that led him to the place where he could scrape a meager living. And while he could choose to sit, it rarely made the news any more pleasant to hear.

When had the crushing pressure in his chest become literal? When had the empty promise of the horizon finally vanished completely, replaced by the pitch darkness of this – forever wall of earth?

Sam did not know. Time had no meaning here.

There were no clocks or watches, and somewhere in his mind he was sure that the world had stopped spinning, his prison was still.

Even that single, distant point of light, so impossibly far above him that he had decided it must be the sky – even that never darkened with the recognition of night. His existence was static, and eternal. Immutable.

Sleep was only a memory, because even the prospect of unconsciousness might have made his present state slightly more bearable. Food as well must be a thing, for he could feel the hunger,

but his imagination failed to picture it. The only smell he knew was the damp and the dirt.

[At this point, it becomes clear that a soft but demanding rain is falling in the background.]

But these things, grim and fearful as they were, were not unfamiliar. The aching hunger was not new, not simply a gift of the eager soil.

He had flashes of an empty belly not assuaged by hands, cracked and calloused from long, grim hours of labor. There was a shadow in his mind of sleepless nights, spent toiling, tired and shaking, desperate for some relief from the relentless pressure that crushed the life of the man that had been Sam, before he was a worm.

And a worm he surely was, for what else could spasm, crawling limbless through the ground, millimeter by millimeter, making its lonely way towards some secret destination no human could understand?

Perhaps he did still have arms or legs or the luxury of both, but down here it was impossible to tell, pressed so close together that to draw a line between a torso and a folded, bending limb was pointless.

If it moves like a worm, thinks like a worm, and screams its awful agonies towards the distant, taunting sky like a worm – *well*.

Conclusion is obvious.

Sam's pale, mottled worm-flesh pressed and squeezed its way ever-forward, ever-upwards – or so he hoped. So he begged.

The light was there; it was *always* there. So small and far it might have been a single pinprick in a pitch-black curtain. Just enough to remind him he had eyes, starved and hollow though they were.

Just enough to remind him that there *was* such a thing as sky, that the endless, open air existed. Enough to kindle in him the fear that he might never see it again.

Worms don't get to see the sky.

If he had slept, he would have dreamed of it, of flying through the light and unchained breeze, mocking the ground that he had always and forever escaped. Another good reason he was not allowed to sleep.

Sometimes, when he bent his neck and gazed longingly upwards towards the light, he could feel something looking back, its vision stretching out and down and through the opaque mud to touch him, drinking in his panic and discomfort as he tried yet again to push himself up and out.

He would call, then, desperately imploring the very thing that reveled in his suffering to end it. As he did so, he sometimes remembered dimly other pleas made in the open air to other forces keen to profit from his degradation. Forces of paper and ink and

decimal points.

But such memories are brief, and gone as Sam's lungs fill once again with sod.

His scream, though short, echoes up and through the rough-hewn tunnel, joined as it rises with the cries of a hundred others, erupting from the holes that pockmark the rotten field in a cacophony, a stomach-churning harmony of dirt-caked shrieking.

Then just as quick as it begins, it is done, and the only ones who will ever hear Sam's screams are the ones who have entombed him.

Can he feel the warmth, from that distant spot of light, a ray of sun down there in the dark?

The poor man's not to know the sun is gone, that what now remains is to serve no other purpose than to let this wretched world be seen.

A lifeless, hollow illumination barely worth the name of light.

But down there in the dark and icy ground, Sam still clings hard to his dream of the Sun, and the ground lets him, of course –

For what true fear can exist without hope, without the belief that things might change for the better? To tug at the knowledge that they will only get worse?

When he has the will, when the cold soil around him has been still and silent for long enough, Sam may once again begin his grim and painful climb.

Moving, squirming along by the merest fractions of a millimeter afforded by his pressing prison, he claws and digs in what might have once been fingers.

The soft earth is always keen to slip away, but sometimes – just sometimes – the tips of those extremities find purchase, and he pulls himself a little bit, *such a tiny bit*, upwards.

And as he twists and crawls and wrenches himself up through the hole, in spite of the *excruciating* slowness, disregarding the scrapes and cuts it opens up in his soft and wormly skin, Sam allows himself to dream of what might be at the top.

He has long since discarded any hope of joy, but deep down he still believes there may be a place where he does not suffer as now.

And after hours, days, impossible to measure weeks, maybe he has moved a meter. Even more perhaps, and however bruised and broken his body may now be, he is closer to the sky, and nobody can take that away from him.

Until the rains begin to fall.

The rains fall here as they do so many places in this new world. Thick and oily drops that taste of bitter salt, torrential tears plummeting from the watching sky, thumping and squelching onto the thirsty soil in which the worms writhe painfully towards a surface that does not want them.

The ground softens. Shifts. And starts to slip and flow into a torrent

of black mud.

Deep below, Sam feels rain begin to drip upon his forehead, and he knows exactly what it means.

He wants to scream again but he is so *tired* by his ascent that the only sound he can produce is a low, defeated wail. And as has happened so many times before in his poor, defeated life, he feels the walls begin to shift and soften, as the slippery flood pushes him down, down, down.

Deeper, perhaps, than he has ever been before, so deep the light is almost gone, but never is the darkness fully complete.

There must always be a distant promise of escape.

Sometimes, when his despair is at his peak, and the sky is only there to mock him, Sam changes his direction. He has breathed the mud so long he has no thought of suffocation, and he pushes his face into the walls of his tunnel and starts to try and dig across.

He is afraid of what he might find beyond the limits of his own constricted tunnel, but between the fear and the despair he makes his choice and digs.

For days or weeks he squirms and struggles through the hard-packed soil, mind dwelling on a pinprick spot of light that he might never see again.

What has he done? Abandoning the route that has been carved for his emergence. The panic begins to set in, and he shudders and

weeps slick, muddy tears of his own.

But then one day, Sam pushes forward and feels his face break through a wall. The earth parts and he finds himself in a tiny sliver of open air.

A room. A cavern. A way out.

It is only as he slides inside so neatly that he realizes what it is: Another tunnel. For another worm.

As he falls deeper into it, he finds himself staring at the pale and hairless face of its inhabitant.

Poor Sam has no way to know his neighbor's name is Richard, that he once struggled in a life as hard and desperate as his own. That his dreams of the light and painful screaming climb towards it is just as keen and grueling.

All that matters is that this new worm is facing up. And Sam, because of how he entered the tunnel, is facing down.

How do you fight, when you cannot move beyond the slowest inching crawl, without limbs or weapons or the kinetic force of violence?

You do it slowly, pressing, biting, tearing gradually through each other until at the very end, one of you is still.

There is no light, for Sam is faced away from it, blocking it from his opponent. But even were it bathed in stark illumination, no one

could have said for sure where the sticky mud ended and the ragged, bloody faces began.

A cloying mass of teeth and tears and torn skin as two terrified victims slowly chew through each other over a distant hope that neither would ever be allowed to achieve.

When it is done, Richard is dead, or quiet enough that it makes no difference, and the tunnel belongs to Sam. It is identical to the one he has left, in all ways other than that he had to do an awful thing to get it. And still he faces downwards.

He rests there for days, with nothing to keep him company but the remains of his opponent, quietly moldering, until at last he begins the gruesome task of turning around.

The contortions that he undergoes, the bending and the breaking that he subjects his pale wormish body to, is a greater pain than any he thought possible, and the snap and pop of bone and sinew echoes to the surface far above.

But at last Sam has his victory: he has claimed another tunnel, and he can see the light.

Perhaps this one will be better, will let him squirm up higher.

But underneath is still that lurking fear that maybe, it is worse.

[The rain starts falling faster, higher.]

The truth is plain enough, though, even as he fights so hard not to know it:

There is no difference, and as the rains begin to fall once again, he knows the world will never let him escape the depths to which he has fallen.

Better to keep him buried, neatly away.

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

God, I hate the Buried.

[He breathes a bit shakily for a few moments.]

ARCHIVIST

End recording.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[EXT. SOMEWHERE IN THE UK, NEAR A DIVISION OF THE BURIED, A BIT WAYS OFF FROM THE ARCHIVIST]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The rain is still pouring full-blast. The wind blows unyieldingly.]

[We hear some howling in the background, all part of the Buried's soundscape.]

MARTIN

Kinda wish the apocalypse had some magazines.

A-Actually no, second thoughts, probably not. *Ooh*. Def, definitely not.

[We hear jostling of his bag.]

MARTIN

(sigh) Come on, John. How long does it take to describe – *scary mud?*

[Multiple things howl. Martin's breath hitches.]

MARTIN

(don't kill me!) Oh – oh, o,okay, okay, okay – sorry, sorry! Sorry.

[The howling subsides.]

[The rain backs off, too, ever-so-slightly, enough to hear a

faint buzzing sound.]

MARTIN

(under his breath) Oh, god –

(normal) What now?

[He takes a step towards the noise, which continues to buzz on regular intervals.]

MARTIN

What, seriously? A spade?

[The buzzing continues over his words.]

MARTIN

Isn't that like kind of, I don't know, insensitive? Given where you are?

[He sighs.]

MARTIN

Fine, fine – fine.

[He sighs, picks the spade up with a scraping metal sound. Starts to dig. Almost immediately, we hear the sound of the old

Nokia ringtone.]

[The shovel continues to make metallic scraping noises as Martin digs out more earth, and the ringing continues to get louder.]

MARTIN

(ugh, of course this would happen) For god's sake.

[He keeps digging, the phone gets louder. Then he picks it up, accepts the call with a little low *boop*.]

MARTIN

Hello?

ANNABELLE CANE

Hello. Is that Martin?

MARTIN

Don't do that.

ANNABELLE

What, no stomach for games?

MARTIN

Well, your games aren't exactly fun for everyone, are they?

ANNABELLE

(audible smirk) Very few games *are*.

MARTIN

L-Look, look, look, I'm talking to Annabelle Cane, right?

ANNABELLE

You never gave me your name, so why should I offer mine?

MARTIN

Just – what do you want?

ANNABELLE

I want to help you, of course.

[Short pause.]

MARTIN

No. Thank you.

ANNABELLE

It's a hard place to find yourself in. Maybe I can be of some – assistance!

MARTIN

You can assist me by giving me the – creepy-phone-thing a rest!

ANNABELLE

He's more powerful here than he's ever been, isn't he?

And you're not sure what that means for you.

[The briefest of pauses. Martin inhales shakily.]

MARTIN

I'm hanging up now.

ANNABELLE

*Does he even need you **at all?***

MARTIN

Bye!

[He hangs up with another *boop*.]

[He sighs. The previously-howling *things* in the Buried – likely the worms far below – howl again, insistently.]

MARTIN

I know, right?

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG167 – Curiosity

Statement ########-7

[EXT. SOMEWHERE IN THE UK]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Footsteps in the gravelly road, walking in a comfortable silence. Then:]

ARCHIVIST

Help us with what?

MARTIN

Excuse me?

[It becomes clear that the Archivist's static is present.]

ARCHIVIST

Annabelle, help us with… what, our, our, our journey, killing Elias, vanishing the Entities – *what?*

MARTIN

Please don't do that.

ARCHIVIST

Do what? *(realizes) Oh.* Oh, right, I, I see, yes. Well, I – Sorry.

MARTIN

It doesn't – feel great, having someone look inside your head.

ARCHIVIST

You can – *feel* it?

[Martin exhales, a small puff of a thing.]

MARTIN

No, but that's hardly the point, John –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Oh, no, I see, sorry, um, right.

MARTIN

I mean, I don't want to keep secrets from you, but –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) You should at least – be able to.

MARTIN

Basically, yeah!

ARCHIVIST

I-I suppose that's fair.

MARTIN

It's just – it's *weird* knowing that you can *know* literally everything I think and feel. E-Especially since you're not exactly the most open of people – emotionally, I mean.

ARCHIVIST

What – That's not fair; I share!

MARTIN

Sure you do.

ARCHIVIST

I do.

MARTIN

Okay, so how exactly would you describe your current emotional state regarding all of this?

ARCHIVIST

I –

MARTIN

(overlapping) Go on, I'm all ears.

ARCHIVIST

I feel…

MARTIN

(go on) Mhm.

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) I feel… sad.

[Brief pause.]

MARTIN

(flat) Sad.

ARCHIVIST

Very sad.

MARTIN

*(*very* flat)* Very sad.

[He sighs slightly as he says it. Their bags jangle.]

ARCHIVIST

Yes, alright; point taken.

MARTIN

You said you could control it now.

ARCHIVIST

I can, I, I just – it – You're absolutely right. I will refrain from Knowing anything about you.

MARTIN

Thank you.

ARCHIVIST

Unless you're in danger.

MARTIN

(with a laugh) Physical danger; If I'm in danger of being mad at you or something –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) I –

[He sighs.]

MARTIN

(continuing over him) – you've got to figure it out the old-fashioned way.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Agreed.

[A sigh.]

[Then:]

ARCHIVIST

So. What did Annabelle say?

MARTIN

(exhale) She offered to help, but she didn't say what with; she… asked us where we were going; I didn't tell her, but… it was pretty obvious she had a good idea?

ARCHIVIST

Did you… feel like she was influencing your mind at all?

MARTIN

I don't think so, but I mean… who knows?

ARCHIVIST

I could.

MARTIN

(increasingly forceful) But look. She didn't control me into asking you not to look into my head, if that's what you're thinking. That's

all me –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Martin, I'm not looking for a – loophole.

MARTIN

Well, good, 'cause this isn't one.

[Brief pause.]

ARCHIVIST

(teasing) Methinks the Spider dost protest too much.

[Martin stops walking.]

MARTIN

John –

ARCHIVIST

(jeez) Joking! Just joking.

[They start walking again.]

MARTIN

(with a sigh) Do you know where she was calling from?

ARCHIVIST

No. She – No. She's still – hidden, somewhere; I, I can see her voice coming down the phone line, but the closer it gets to her the harder it is to see.

Mm, Christ, this all feels so – *(inhale)* obtuse; it's like, I have the power to *drink the whole ocean,* but I have to do it through a straw.

[He sighs.]

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

Just – I don't know, it – it worries me, I guess? You know, when you do the whole – *(imitation of the Archivist's 'Statement Voice')* – *curse this flesh prison – (normal)* – thing, it –

I get you're different; none of us are what we were, but, well? It worries me.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry.

MARTIN

That's not – It's okay.

[The Archivist sighs.]

MARTIN

(brighter) Anyway, *my* flesh prison – *(small laugh)* – would like to stop for a bit. How far until the next… domain?

ARCHIVIST

A while. If you want to stop, it's as good a place as any.

MARTIN

(with a sigh) No, I just – need a moment. One where I'm not just relentlessly pushing forward.

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping, large sigh) Alright, we can stop.

[They stop walking. We hear a bit of jingling as they presumably set down their bags and sit down.]

[They sit in silence for a bit.]

[Then:]

[Martin sighs.]

MARTIN

Why did it have to be us?

ARCHIVIST

You'd rather be a bystander?

[Clothing sounds as he shifts.]

ARCHIVIST

Trapped in one of those places?

MARTIN

I don't know. *No.*. I just – *(exhale)* I bet Gertrude would be able to do this, you know? She – She would eat a hellscape like this for *breakfast*.

[Slight pause.]

ARCHIVIST

I – don't think she would have done very well here.

MARTIN

No?

ARCHIVIST

No.

[More sounds of movement.]

MARTIN

Do you… Know that?

[A brief pause. The Archivist's static starts up. He takes a shaky breath.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

To say that Gertrude Robinson never had a friend would not be true. She was close in her way to many people, but looking back I wonder if she ever realized just how strongly she herself reeked of the Lonely.

When she first joined the Archives, she took the place of a man named Angus Stacey, whose face was torn from his skull by a creature of masks and smiles.

Gertrude had thought of as 'The Grinning Wheel,' and it was one of the first things to fall at the hands of the Institute's new avenger. Appropriately enough, Gertrude used fire.

She had some small knowledge of the truth of things when she first took the position, enough knowledge to be dangerous, as the old saying goes, but also enough to be cautious, and it was leaning into this second inclination that kept her alive through those first few

years.

Angus Stacey had, in the long tradition of Institute Archivists, been a disappointment to the man whose eyes then sat in the smirking face of one Director Richard Mendelson.

Angus had been too keen to learn, too ambitious in his academic legacy. He had had grand plans to revise Smirke's Fourteen, and, in doing so, burned through his resources, his luck, and ultimately all but one of his assistants.

When Gertrude was appointed to the role, there was a single survivor left in the Archives: A woman by the name of Fiona Law.

Fiona was the most fascinating combination of curiosity and cowardice, pushing forward and forward into the unknown until the very first moment of threat crystallized, and then she was away.

Of course, retreat is not always possible in such a line of business, and when that proved to be the case, there was a single trait which Fiona possessed that saw her surviving encounters which had killed far braver souls than her:

Because when she was pushed to the very limits of her terror, Fiona Law would faint. And while there are those things in the dark that would kill you as you slept, most get no real delight from it, unless you are awake enough to know what is happening.

And so, through cowardice and unconsciousness, Fiona had survived an entire generation of Archivist. And even stranger, when

Angus Stacey died and she had the chance to walk away, she decided to remain.

She had never got deep enough into the mysteries that plagued her to slake that burning curiosity. And she never would.

Alongside this inherited survivor, Gertrude would add two more assistants: Eric Delano and Emma Harvey. They were young, like her, keen to delve deeper into those strange secrets that back then were spoken of more openly.

To them, Fiona seemed something of a joke, a middle-aged chatterbox who told stories of the Blitz and jumped at the long shadows in the corners of the Archives.

Emma in particular was Gertrude's confidant, the one whose knowledge and instincts she trusted, and the only member of the Institute who ever knew of the strange bond between Gertrude and Agnes Montague.

But Emma had a sickness. As much as she might have despised the aging Fiona, it was the same one that plagued her: Curiosity. That desperate, grasping need to know.

Emma, however, was circumspect enough to recognize the danger of such inclinations in a place like the Archives, and after those initial few years, settled on a question.

The first question to which she would apply her methods of… experimentation: Why wasn't Fiona dead yet?

The experiments were simple enough. When a statement was close enough and real enough that finding its source seemed a possibility, Emma would volunteer herself and Fiona to investigate it.

Eric had always been a homebody, and had no problem being left out of such expeditions, while Gertrude had far better things to do than worry about the comings and going of her assistants, and so let her trusted Emma arrange things as she pleased.

Once out near danger, Fiona would always find herself ever-so-slightly ahead, always seeming to be inexplicably the first through the door. And more often than not it would close behind her. By the end, the poor woman genuinely believed spontaneously locking doors were a tell-tale sign of the supernatural.

Emma would do her best to observe from safety, making notes, only retrieving the often unconscious Fiona when the danger passed. She watched as her poor guinea pig stumbled through a maze of whispering grubs. She timed the intervals at which Fiona emerged from a hungry fog, and recorded her barely escaping the Sandman who came to take her eyes.

Poor Fiona never suspected a thing. Decades this went on, until Fiona was old and tired. There was less chaos back then. Gertrude's war was still only kindling, and years might go by without anything terrible brushing against the Institute. But at last, they found a coffin. And it was not a place that could be escaped by fleeing or by fainting.

When Emma came to tell Gertrude what had happened, she found the first of the cobwebs in her hair, the ones she would wash from it every morning for the rest of her life. And Gertrude mourned the first of many losses, and did not suspect the truth.

Eventually, Fiona was replaced by a young man named Michael. Far too young to have such a job, really, but – things were different in those days. He was keen and eager, and Emma had a – slightly different idea of how to test him.

She never really touched Eric, of course. He had been marked early by another who Emma was… keen not to cross.

But young Michael? So innocent, so naive? She decided to experiment with how long she could keep him in the dark as to what was *really* going on.

As it turns out: All his life.

This time, Gertrude *did* have an inkling as to what was happening, but had her own escalating conflicts to concern herself with, and recognized the potential in a truly ignorant assistant.

At some point Eric disappeared. It's interesting the places that Gertrude did and did not think to look for him. She scoured the most warped and darkened corners of London, expecting any moment to find his remains. But she took Mary at her word when she said she hadn't seen him.

She could have Known the truth, of course, if she had wished, but it

was so much easier to make it another pillar of her crusade. Emma knew what had happened, but had no interest in sharing such details.

Eric was replaced by another assistant, not so young as Michael, and hardened with some encounters of her own. She was eager to prove herself, and exactly the sort of person to intrigue the aging Emma.

There was… a fire to Sarah Carpenter, perhaps the one which led to Gertrude hiring her, and Emma's curiosity ignited once again, this time keen to find out exactly what it would take to break this brave investigator of the unknown.

By this point Gertrude was fully lost to her plots and plans and struggles, and as long as her assistants played their parts when asked, she paid them no more mind. And the frequency of genuine encounters grew as the season of hurried rituals came nearer.

It wasn't hard for Emma to convince her younger colleague to take the lead in their inquiries. She took Sarah to a cave and sent her deep inside to see how far it went. There was no end, and the darkness was deeper than an absence of light would allow, but Sarah held firm to her cable, and Emma was gracious enough to pull her back into the light.

She took Sarah to the woods with a strange book of astronomy and suggested she go and chart the stars. The brave stargazer stayed beneath the canopy, never quite lost herself to the cosmos, though

sometimes when Emma looked into her eyes she could still see a reflection of uncanny constellations.

She even convinced Sarah to stay inside an old man's house, desperate to see her eaten by a hungry door, but was again disappointed.

And all through it Gertrude could not see what was happening. And certainly the Spider smoothed things, elided questions, wiped away evidence, but it barely had to. Far better to feed Gertrude a steady string of plans to foil and rituals to derail.

Sarah's luck ran out when Gertrude and Michael were away on a last trip to that frozen island that did not exist. Emma had been given the statement of a widow whose life and home and partner had been taken by a man who, as she put it, *"burned on the inside."* And so Sarah and her secret tormentor went looking for this being, and they found him standing in the smoking ruin of an old farmhouse.

He was bald, dressed in dreary office clothes. To a cursory examination, unfit and unremarkable, save for his peculiar surroundings. If they had paused and looked closer, Emma might have seen the drizzling rain rising as steam from his skin. Sarah may have noticed the thin lines in his flesh from whence spilled a dull orange glow.

But they didn't. And as was her custom, Emma allowed her old knees to betray her, falling behind her companion.

Sarah Carpenter's last words were "Hello? I'm from –"

And then it was over. He split open like a flower bud blooming, and inside there was only the most terrifying heat. She had no time to run, and by the time she thought to scream it was too late as the thing enveloped her, closing tight, until she was simply more ash, trapped forever inside that charred and hollow shell.

Emma knew as she ran that she might have gone too far.

When Gertrude returned with no Michael to a silent Archive and only Emma's stammered lies to fill it, she finally started to suspect the truth. She wondered briefly if it was hypocrisy, to feel such anger at what Emma Harvey had done, when she now had blood aplenty on her hands, including Michael's.

But it didn't matter. The rage she felt was ice-cold. And so Gertrude went to the one person she was certain she could trust on the matter.

Agnes Montague and Gertrude Robinson only ever met once in their lives. Even if the Lightless Flame had allowed it, what would there have been to say? The bond between them, real as it was, was no one's choice but the Web's, and neither of them was keen to play its game any further than they had to.

Their discussion was brief, and tinged with a melancholy, an awareness of mistakes, of their choices and duties and destinies. Neither of them smiled. But Agnes did confirm what Gertrude knew, and the details of Sarah's suffering only sharpened that deep

and wounded hatred.

It was a trivial matter to convince the man who now watched from the skull of Elias Bouchard to allow it, so long as the deed did not take place within the Archives itself.

But it didn't need to. An employee's home address is a simple thing to acquire.

When Emma Harvey awoke to the searing heat, she knew she was already dead. As the fire took her, and left her flesh running off her bones like oil, all she willed was not to give it the satisfaction of being afraid.

I wonder if it would have upset Gertrude to learn that, even at the end, Emma had no idea it was her that had arranged it. Maybe not. For all her anger, there was no thirst for revenge in the Archivist, only an eagerness to expunge an infection that had gone unnoticed for too long.

And with that, Gertrude Robinson was without assistants.

She never hired another. She worked with those that seemed useful until they were no longer so – Leitner. Dekker. Keay. Even Salesa on occasion. But she never again allowed herself to trust.

[Pause. Then:]

[The Archivist inhales.]

ARCHIVIST

I, I, I'm sorry; I – I didn't, um –

MARTIN

Oh, no, it's, uh – it's okay. *(cough)* I just – I couldn't – *not* listen, or interrupt. Or –

ARCHIVIST

I, I, I promise, I didn't know I was going to do that.

MARTIN

I, I understand. *(brief pause, exhale)* Well, let's… *(sigh)* try to avoid that next time.

[He ends this with a little laugh.]

ARCHIVIST

Yes, quite.

[He sighs.]

[Some movement, an exhale of air through puffed cheeks, and then:]

MARTIN

So. What? Without assistants she'd be *bad* at the apocalypse?

[More movement.]

ARCHIVIST

W-Without trust. W-Without a reason.

Gertrude needed both the purpose her mission gave her and the control her position allowed. To be here, like us, without a – a reason, without someone to ground her? She – She'd have power, but – no control. No real purpose.

Perhaps she'd have dedicated herself to a d,doomed quest like us but – *(quieter, contemplative)* No. I think this would have broken her. And she'd have resigned herself to – ruling her domain.

MARTIN

What domain?

[Movement.]

ARCHIVIST

We all have domain here, Martin. The place that feeds us.

MARTIN

Oh. *(brief pause)* Where's yours?

ARCHIVIST

(laugh) I mean we're – traveling towards it.

MARTIN

Oh. Right, obviously. *Duh.* Uh, what about me?

ARCHIVIST

(cautiously) Would you… like me to –

MARTIN

(overlapping, sharp) No, no. Don't tell me.

I don't want to know.

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

[Martin inhales, then lets out a little *hm*.]

MARTIN

(coy) So. If you say Gertrude wouldn't have been able to go on without a *reason* –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping, audible fond eyeroll) Yes, Martin, you are my reason.

MARTIN

Just wanted to make you say it!

[A beat wherein the Archivist inhales.]

MARTIN

Cool.

ARCHIVIST

Right. *(exhale)* Should we press on?

[He starts to get the bags together.]

MARTIN

No – uh – just, uh – before we do.

ARCHIVIST

Mhm?

MARTIN

A moment ago, when you were talking.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

MARTIN

The old Archivist, Angus.

[The Archivist inhales, a bit sharply.]

MARTIN

You said Fiona was… released when he died.

[The Archivist exhales over his words.]

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

If *you* had died,

[The Archivist inhales again.]

MARTIN

– would the others have been able to quit?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. *(pause)* I didn't know.

MARTIN

If you had, would you have told them? Would that have, have

changed what happened?

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) I don't know, Martin. I-I don't know.

[The bags get reshouldered. They start walking.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG168 - Roots

Statement ########-8

[EXT. SOMEWHERE IN THE UK]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The Archivist releases a long sigh as he and Martin walk. The footsteps, as are now typical, are crunchy.]

[The environment here is deceptively quiet, but for the constant running of whispers in the background. They overlap so fully it almost feels like listening to running water if not listening closely.]

ARCHIVIST

O-kay! Time you went for a walk.

MARTIN

Y-Yeah, about that… *(small exhale)* You're sure you'll be okay on your own?

ARCHIVIST

*(small exhale, almost an **um**)* I always have been.

MARTIN

Okay. I mean – Well, I don't *like* this place.

ARCHIVIST

Once again, Martin, that's – sort of the point!

[They both let out a small laugh.]

MARTIN

Yeah, yeah – I *know,* alright; I get it; it's just – it's *more* than that. This place, what did you call it, the – *(he fumbles for the name) The Rotten Core?*

ARCHIVIST

The *Corpse Routes*.

MARTIN

Yeah, yeah, that. Well, it – it feels – *(sigh)* I don't know, like it's –

ARCHIVIST

Waiting.

MARTIN

Yeah! Waiting.

[Something creaks in the background over their words.]

[Long pause.]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

This is the one with the, um, death guy, isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

This is Oliver Banks' domain, yes.

[Slight pause.]

MARTIN

So it's him that's waiting.

ARCHIVIST

Not *just* him, but – *(exhale)* yes.

MARTIN

So, are you gonna smite him, then?

ARCHIVIST

(pause) …Um…

MARTIN

John?

[The Archivist sighs softly, but gives no response.]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

John, I said are you going to s–

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) I heard you the first time.

MARTIN

And?…

ARCHIVIST

I-I don't know.

MARTIN

Why not? Can't you just do what you did what that Sasha-thing, make the Eye *See him* and all that?

ARCHIVIST

I… could, I think.

MARTIN

…Cool, so what's the problem, then? Take another monster off the hit list; job done.

ARCHIVIST

…It's not. That simple?

MARTIN

Well, what does *that* mean. *(slight pause, **insistent**)* What does that *mean,* John? What, what happened to *Kill Bill? (barest of pauses)* John? John, *you* said –

ARCHIVIST

I know what I said, and I don't – *(sigh)* I don't know, Martin. I just – I don't think he's – *(sigh)* I don't know; I don't think he's evil.

[Something creaks.]

MARTIN

(really?) Oh, yeah, sure; he's probably a really kind, *benevolent* ruler of a hellish fear prison.

ARCHIVIST

It's just – he helped me. Wh, When I was – *(short pause)* He woke me up.

MARTIN

*(flat, flat, **so** flat)* Wow. What a hero.

ARCHIVIST

Martin?

MARTIN

(immediately) What. *(beat, the Archivist makes an amused sound) What. (beat, off the Archivist)* Yeah, alright; I know; I'm sorry.

[There's the sound of some movement over his words.]

ARCHIVIST

(audibly amused) …Is there something you want to talk about?

[He doesn't quite manage to hold back his laugh as he finishes speaking.]

MARTIN

No, I'm – fine; it's fine; everything's fine! I'm sorry.

[Slight pause.]

ARCHIVIST

(cat's got the cream) Martin…

MARTIN

(too quick) I said it's fine.

ARCHIVIST

(still so audibly smug) Are you *jealous?*

MARTIN

I *told* you not to Know things about me!

ARCHIVIST

(laughing) I really didn't have to.

MARTIN

(uh) I – Y-You – ***Good.*** 'Cause I'm definitely not.

ARCHIVIST

*(**very** amused)* Alright!

MARTIN

Look, I'm fine, alright?

ARCHIVIST

*(oh, **so** amused)* You said.

MARTIN

(too defensive) Yes, I did! And e– and even if I *was* jealous, I would be perfectly justified anyway, *so!*

ARCHIVIST

(absolutely grinning) But you're not.

MARTIN

No! I'm fine.

ARCHIVIST

Alright!

MARTIN

*(so **there!**)* Good!

ARCHIVIST

(matching tone) Good!

MARTIN

(end of conversation) Great.

[Long pause.]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Alright, fine, yes, yes, I *am* jealous, alright? Yes, if you absolutely *must* know.

ARCHIVIST

Because… he woke me up.

[Martin makes a couple of sounds of disbelief.]

MARTIN

I was there *weeks*, and *nothing.* He talks to you for *five minutes* and

suddenly you're back on your feet, and – bouncing around like a, like a spring chicken!

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping, laughing) I mean, that's *really* not –

MARTIN

(overlapping) I mean, what's so special about him, that you wake up for him and not me, hm? Enlighten me.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, that's – that's not really how it worked. It – It wasn't –

[He stops, reformulates his next words.]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Look. Martin, I'm sorry you feel that way, but I'm not going to kill a man just because you're jealous.

MARTIN

Why not?!

[Pause.]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

(deflating) Yeah. Yeah, I know, I know, I know.

[He lets out a small sigh.]

[Another pause. Then:]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Please?

[The Archivist snickers.]

ARCHIVIST

Who knows. Maybe he'll try to stop us getting through the routes, and I'll have to.

MARTIN

Mm.

ARCHIVIST

But I'm not going to – seek him out. At the very least he's earned not having me hunt him down.

MARTIN

Fine. I suppose that's – *reasonable*.

ARCHIVIST

Now, if you're – quite done inciting me to murder?

MARTIN

Not murder! Smiting.

[The Archivist sighs heavily.]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Right, yes, yes, of course. You – *(long inhale)* You vomit your horrors.

[The Archivist makes a *very* disgusted sound.]

ARCHIVIST

(with a laugh) Oh – I'm not sure I like that metaphor.

MARTIN

Puke your terrors?

ARCHIVIST

…Just go.

MARTIN

Alright! Alright, I'm going.

[We hear him pick up his bag and walk off a ways.]

[The Archivist laughs fondly after him; you can practically hear him shaking his head. He follows it up with a heavy exhale.]

[And then: just the whispers of the Corpse Routes.]

[And then:]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Report to prevent future deaths. This report is being sent to:

(voice changes, softens; it's almost his normal voice) **The Great Eye that watches all who linger in terror and gorges itself on the sufferings of those under its unrelenting, stuporous gaze. And its Archive, which draws knowledge of this suffering unto itself.**

(statement voice, which here is lower and more brusque) **One:** Coroner.

I am Oliver Banks, sometimes known as Antonio Blake or Dr Thomas Pritchard. I serve The Coming End That Waits For All And Will Not Be Ignored.

Two: Coroner's legal powers.

I make this report under no authority, no regulation or act of law save the hollow power and grim responsibility given me by the Termination of All Life. With it, I may see and spread the hidden veins of destiny that wrap us close and draw us through the empty,

yearning parody of meaning that we call life, knowing at all stages that the last and final point of this journey is a blank and futile end.

I have no power to stop it, and even if I did, I would not do so. For to rob a soul of death is as torturous as its inevitable coming.

Three: Investigation and inquest.

On the first and last day of the age of the Beholding, I begin my vigil into the doom of Danika Gelsthorpe.

She was, at the time of the change, thirty-four years of age, and found herself within my domain, traveling slowly and unremittingly along the length of the stretching Corpse Routes.

She is one of many thousands, neither remarkable nor unique in her background or destination. She has spent the last twenty of those years acutely aware and in constant dread of a death she believed to be imminent.

The earliest she can remember being certain she was about to die was when, at the age of fifteen due to a chronic case of acid reflux, she decided that she had a malignant intestinal tumor. She would spend whole nights lying awake, imagining it there, growing. Spreading. Blocking her organs and preparing to kill her.

Danika knew the whole thing was ridiculous, of course, and did not visit a doctor about it, simply assuming it would be discovered when she finally collapsed. She diagnosed herself with a year to live, at most.

At the age of sixteen, she contracted a case of acute gastroenteritis which knotted her guts so severely that she had to have several scans taken by a buzzing hospital machine. Young Danika lay there on the hospital bed, waiting for the stern-faced doctor to come in and tell her what she already knew: that she had months, at most, to live.

When they said no such thing, talking about her treatment for her decidedly non-fatal condition, an incredible sense of joy began to overtake her. A deep and profound relief. There was nothing there. She wasn't going to die! She was going to have a life.

At least, for the next three months, which was how long it took her to find a lump in her chest that she decided was fatal breast cancer. This one, she did get checked out, and was told in no uncertain terms that it was a harmless cyst.

But she knew they'd missed something. Clearly the cyst had distracted them, causing them to miss the actual tumor. But she couldn't go back. No doubt she'd be dead within a year. Two, at most.

And so it continued for the next two decades of her life. She started smoking at the age of seventeen, battling with the addiction her whole life, and not once was there a chesty cough that she did not decide was lung cancer.

When she had her first panic attack at age twenty-three, she was absolutely certain that she was having a stroke. Every dizzy spell

was a sign of MS; every achy leg was a fatal blood clot.

She never feared an epidemic or a plague, and the thought of infection rarely troubled her, because she knew that whatever was about to imminently kill her was going to rise up from deep inside her own body.

For her whole life, as each milestone of adulthood passed, Danika never believed that she would live more than two years further.

Every relationship was tinged with a melancholic guilt that she would leave them so soon. Every achievement overshadowed by the certainty she wouldn't be around to enjoy it for very much longer.

Real problems – her acid reflux, her blood pressure – were ignored, because – well. They wouldn't matter for much longer, would they?

When the change came and the fears oozed forth into our world, the End that laces through every fiber of my soul reached out and gave Danika to me. She had fed it well for so long; it was only right that she should be here.

Four: Circumstances of the death.

In exactly thirteen stretches of the route on which Danika travels – a stretch being measured in the waves of nauseating terror that flow out of her with such rhythmic regularity – she will finally arrive at her destination.

It will be a crowded place, a shopping mall or somewhere similar, though her feet will never leave the route that binds her. She will

fear it first as a dull ache, a sensation not unlike being pinched, but on the inside of her leg. Her skin will prickle like a faint and shuddering electric current were passing through it, and she will absentmindedly scratch at it as though it were a simple itch that could be dismissed.

She will know *exactly* what is happening, but after so many scares and false alarms and dismal, morbid obsessions, she will not feel comfortable enough to sound any alarm or ask for anyone's help.

She will simply stagger over to a bench that is nearby and find herself a seat to try and wait out whatever unpleasant sensation's washing over her, even though she is certain it will never leave her.

It is, alas, the act of sitting down that dislodges the long-foreseen blood clot in her leg, formed when she took that long-distance coach trip. She should have known with her dreadful circulation that cramming herself into so little leg room would be the end of her, but she had dismissed such thoughts, waving them away as more paranoia.

But the End knows there is no paranoia about your own demise. Only that dim, plodding awareness of its constant approach.

The clot, now broken, will travel up and through her. Danika will feel its passage all through her body, aware of it as every vein of the Corpse Route is aware of her and those just like her, walking along their all-too-brief span.

She will begin to cough as it hits her lungs, her anxious dread and

sense of doom bubbling up to fever pitch as the pink mucus bubbles up through her lips.

She clutches her chest, as if desperate to pull the knotted blood vessels out with her bare hands, and looks wildly about. But the crowds that were there such a short time ago have vanished, and there is nobody to help her. Nobody to see her collapse and call an ambulance. It is too late. It has always been too late.

Danika Gelsthorpe will try one last time to stand, and instead collapse into a corner, mostly obscured by a large pot plant, and will not be discovered for at least half an hour, by which point any hope of saving her has long since passed.

She remains conscious for several minutes after she falls, unable to move or speak or even think in any recognizable sense, but aware enough of what is happening to be grasped with the despair of a terror realized.

And then, at last, she dies. Her last thoughts are certainty of the yawning well of nothingness that awaits her as consciousness slips away.

Danika takes another step along the Corpse Route.

Five: Coroner's concerns.

I watch, as with each motion, each laboured, reluctant movement along her path, Danika Gelsthorpe is painfully and inescapably aware of what it is that lies at the end of it. She tries to move

backwards, off to the side, any direction other than that unstoppable, inescapable forwards. But her limbs seize up with the attempt.

She tries to stay still, but can do so only with the most incredible of efforts. To eke out another few seconds of stasis sets every nerve in her body aflame with agony and effort, begging her to scream despite her jaw being set in a frozen rictus of somber morning.

I see her relive the coming moment of her inevitable demise. Every inch along the route she moves, she sees another flash of what is to come, the sickening knowledge of where she is going, the sensation of traveling there, through the movements of her own body, as much as those movements may be made under her own duress.

No amount of protest or effort can travel any other way but towards the end.

Sometimes, for some small variety, I will allow Danika to brush against another route. The final fate of someone she loves.

She may see Maria lying in her hospital bed, monitors crowding her as the doctors struggle to get an IV into her wildly convulsing arm. She might have a flash of Bobby, fingers tightening around the rungs of the ladder as the rusted nails give way.

She often sees Dennis's face as the knife slips eagerly between his ribs, even though he doesn't die for hours afterwards. And with each one she knows her steps forward bring closer not only her own end, but also all of theirs.

Time walks forward with her but she has not the strength to stop it.

Her fate draws ever-nearer, filling me with the joy of watchful fear, but also my own concerns.

The matters of concern are as follows:

a) When Danika Gelsthorpe reaches the end of her Corpse Route, she *will* die. This new world of fear reviles death as a release, but the Coming End cannot exist without its reality.

It is not a being of dangled promises and shifting torments. The *certainty* of death waits for all who travel the Corpse Routes, and that certainty *will* be delivered on, without hesitation or consideration of any other factors.

b) This place is a limit on the fear that can be generated from them, as their pool is necessarily finite and ultimately, however slowly, it will be exhausted.

To be offset, this consideration will require the acquisition of victims from other domains as replacements, potentially inciting… bad feeling between those domains.

c) A metaphysical quirk of this new reality's divorce from the traditional concept of time, and – one for which I have no further explanation, means that I do not believe new humans are being created or born.

The souls trapped within this transformed world are the only ones who will ever be here, and the presence of the Termination of All

requires that – ultimately, that is what will happen.

However slowly, the domains of death will be removing sufferers from a closed system. However many thousands of years may be experienced in time, eventually this world will be left barren and empty.

d) When this happens, the Great Powers themselves will also fade and die, withering away into nothingness and releasing this reality from their grip.

I… do not know how I feel about this.

Six: Actions that should be taken.

None. Even if such a fate could be avoided, as it comes closer and the other Entities grow in their awareness of their *own* end, the grotesque ripples of their own impossible panic shall glut and feed my master, gorging it to the point where – perhaps it will even surpass the Watcher in prominence.

The others may take what actions they wish; they may plot and plan and tear themselves apart in an attempt to separate from the fate that they *know* they cannot escape, but they will fail. The currents of perception and reality may twist in whatever shapes they want, but none of them can ever render things truly eternal.

And I shall help, ushering on this final, blank emptiness. Perhaps once it might have horrified me, or given me some sense of pursuing the ultimate release of the world that ***you*** have damned.

But I am too much of my Patron now, and my feelings cannot help but reflect the shadows of… anticipation that lurk within the grave. The End does not fear its own cessation, for it is the certainty and promise of all life, however strange, that it will one day finish, and that includes its own stark existence.

It shall be the last, and when the universe is silent and still forever, it shall, perhaps, in that impossible moment before it vanishes, finally be satisfied.

Seven: Your response.

Please, John, do not interpret this report as a plea for mercy or a call to action. I would have offered it willingly, of course, but to do so is no longer an option.

You cannot ask. You may only take. And so the scope of my domain is yours. Enter it and destroy me, if you wish.

I fear the annihilation you would gift me –

[Creeeeak.]

– as little as I desire it.

I am now, as the thing I feed, a fixed point, that has neither the longing nor the ability to change its state of existence.

I can do nothing *to* you, and you may walk the Corpse Routes in safety should you choose, though if you wish to confront me, you

will have to seek me out.

You know, of course, where I am. But know that – even you, with all your power, cannot keep the world alive forever.

All things end, and every step you take, whatever direction you may choose, only brings you closer to it.

[Creeeak.]

Report ends.

[The Archivist exhales heavily.]

ARCHIVIST

Lot to think about. I – I feel… No. I don't want to destroy Oliver Banks. It wouldn't do any good. I know that, and he never asked for this any more than I did.

I feel badly for those who exist in his domain, o-of course, I do, but – *(shaky inhale)* At least their suffering will be over. Eventually.

I can't destroy everyone I cross paths with, it – *(shaky inhale/exhale)* No. If Oliver will not seek me out, then I will leave him be. *(dry laugh)* The Avatar of Death shall live. *(heavy inhale)* Martin's going to be thrilled.

[He exhales, starts walking.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG169 – Fire Escape

Statement ########–9

[EXT. SOMEWHERE IN THE UK, NEAR JUDE PERRY'S DOMAIN]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The background is a-crackling. It sounds like fire. Under it all, is something that sounds like a high-pitched whirring – at least, until you realize that they're screams.]

ARCHIVIST

Martin? Still with me?

MARTIN

(very shaky) Y-Y-Ye-Yeah, Yeah. *(beat)* Oh, *Jesus!*

ARCHIVIST

Some fears don't need to be intensified. Only manifested.

MARTIN

Are we even going to be able to make it through all that?

[Something crumples; it sounds somewhere in between flopping cardstock and thunder.]

ARCHIVIST

It's a maze in there – deliberately so. People running, desperately struggling for fire escapes only to find them blocked.

We won't get lost, though. I know the route.

MARTIN

That's… not really what I was getting at, John.

ARCHIVIST

Go on.

MARTIN

…Seriously? You don't – It's on *fire*, John; it's –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Mm –

MARTIN

(overlapping) – it's a burning. Building!

ARCHIVIST

Yes, it is.

MARTIN

That's on *fire!*

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

Right. You are aware that traditionally, wading into a flaming inferno is actually considered bad for your health!

ARCHIVIST

(a bit tired; we've been here before) Yes, Martin. It'll be **fine**.

MARTIN

Alright, I just wanted to check. So. Okay. We're planning to go through… all this, so I'm guessing the fire can't actually burn us! Right? John?

ARCHIVIST

Um…

MARTIN

(please say yes) John?

ARCHIVIST

(how to say this?) Um… mm –

MARTIN

John.

ARCHIVIST

I-It's complicated.

MARTIN

Well, if you want me to go in there with you, then I suggest you find a way to make it – simple! *(firm)* Yes or no, can that fire hurt us?

ARCHIVIST

Define 'hurt.'

MARTIN

(no-nonsense) Will the fire feel hot to me?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

Will it cause me lots of pain if I touch it?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, though not as much as –

MARTIN

(overlapping, increasingly frantic) Will it *burn me alive* and kill me dead*?*

ARCHIVIST

No. It can't do us any permanent harm – once we're out, we'll be fine.

MARTIN

(ever-so-slightly shaky) You are aware that intense pain can do you *loads* of harm, even if there's no, you know, *physical* injury –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping, snapping) Yes, I know, okay! *(immediate sigh)* I'll take us through the parts that are more… subdued.

[Martin takes a breath to start to say something; the Archivist rolls on.]

ARCHIVIST

It goes in phases; sometimes there are whole apartments that aren't actively on fire for… hours!

MARTIN

(flat) How reassuring.

ARCHIVIST

(snapping again) Well, it's the best I can do!

MARTIN

You're sure there isn't another way?

[He sighs. Silence, but for the background crackling.]

MARTIN

Yeah, I know, *the journey will be the journey*, blah blah ominous blah.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry.

MARTIN

It's fine. I know you wouldn't take me through if we didn't actually need to *go* through, so…

[Silence – then, a soft exhale.]

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

Well…

MARTIN

John, is there another way?

ARCHIVIST

I mean – sort of? Maybe?

MARTIN

(realizing) That turn. You – You took a hard turn after the roots back there; I *knew* that was a thing! Why are we here?

ARCHIVIST

It's just – when you said –

MARTIN

*(overlapping, **hard**)* John, **why** have you taken us here?

ARCHIVIST

Jude Perry.

[Silence.]

ARCHIVIST

This is where Jude Perry rules.

[Another silence.]

MARTIN

That's the one who burned your hand, isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

[Slight pause, filled by another thunder-like crack and crumble.]

MARTIN

Right. I just assumed it would be… who was that landlord guy?

ARCHIVIST

Arthur Nolan. He's here; he has a part of it, but it's… huge. Bigger than you could believe. There's *so much* fear in there.

MARTIN

But we're not going after him, are we.

ARCHIVIST

No.

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

You said you were onboard.

MARTIN

I was! I am. I just thought –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) It wouldn't hurt?

MARTIN

That we'd be *safe.*

ARCHIVIST

I never said –

MARTIN

(overlapping) I know! I know, okay, I just – *(bracing exhale)* Look, I j,just – don't want to get burned, all right? It's, it's like my *least* favorite pain ever.

ARCHIVIST

Is that – a joke?

MARTIN

(a bit faster, a bit shaky) No, no, okay? I, I legitimately hate burns, alright? They're, they're *awful*, and they *scar horribly*, and they just

– it – it just makes me sick; I, I hate it. *Hate* it!

ARCHIVIST

Alright. If you really don't want to do this, w-we can go another way.

MARTIN

(somewhat smaller) Really?

ARCHIVIST

Really. My revenge… *(long sigh)* Well, let's just say you're more important.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

(inhale) It's not just your revenge though, is it? Destroying her… it would help all those people in there, wouldn't it?

ARCHIVIST

Maybe? It's… *(inhale)* Like I said, I can't see the future. It wouldn't *free* them, if that's what you're asking. 'Free' doesn't really exist in this place.

MARTIN

Apart from us.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose. In a sense, though – *(dry laughing)* How much of that is because we are trapped in our own quest to –

MARTIN

(overlapping) Okay, let's, let's not dive into another – ontological debate right now. Not here.

ARCHIVIST

Fair enough. So are we going in or not?

MARTIN

You're – I, you're asking me?

ARCHIVIST

I should have told you before, so – I leave the decision to you. You know my feelings on the matter.

MARTIN

I… do?

ARCHIVIST

I – Oh, right: I want revenge on Jude Perry. I want to… smite her. Make her feel what – *(sigh)* What all her victims felt.

But I'm not willing to force you to suffer for it.

MARTIN

Okay. So it's – *(brief pause) I* have to choose, do I?

ARCHIVIST

Or we could sit here.

MARTIN

…No. No, I'm not going to choose; I don't, I don't think that's a fair decision to put on me. It's *your* revenge; *your* choice, not mine.

[Silence.]

ARCHIVIST

Fine. We go in.

[That crumpling again.]

MARTIN

(inhale, shaky, a bit surprised) Al-Alright then!

ARCHIVIST

We'll be fine.

MARTIN

J– Lead the way.

[They start walking.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[EXT. SOMEWHERE IN THE UK, JUDE PERRY'S DOMAIN]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[A fluorescent light hums.]

[The crackling of flames is closer, here. More distinct. There's a rushing sound, like hissing air – a thinning fire extinguisher, perhaps?]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Home. Such a simple word. Home – not *house,* not *dwelling*, not *residence* or *address*, not *domicile* or *flat* or *lodging* or *abode* or *apartment* or *property* or *accommodation*. **Home**.

A structure of brick or wood or concrete or canvas. A box in which you pack yourself away when the long day is done. A book neatly closed and placed snugly on a shelf.

There's no place like home. An Englishman's home is his castle. Home is where the heart is.

[In the background, indistinct words come through, seemingly over a loudspeaker.]

And home is where that heart can be hurt most severely, because within that place of safety, the warm and welcoming embrace of the cramped and well-trod floors whose layout has ingrained itself into your *soul*, there you are most vulnerable.

Your home is an extension of yourself, as much as you will let it be, and the place and the people and the things that form it and fill it are as much a part of you as your blood. As your bile. As your tears.

Perhaps you know the feeling that comes rushing over you when your home is compromised, invaded, corrupted. Perhaps a burglary gives lie to the promise of safety you took from a flimsy front door and a cheap lock.

Maybe the dirt and grime builds up to such a degree that the stench begins to infect your soul, or an infestation of moths or ants or bed bugs stretches itself throughout the very structure of your home until it feels like your skin is *squirming* with them.

You may even find yourself living with a hostile, toxic presence, whether they be family, friend, or stranger, that poisons your home, turning blessed relief and rest from the tribulations of the world into a choking fog of anxiety and fear.

Such are the dangers of a rotten home.

But how many truly control their home? How many have extended

their soul into the walls of a place that exists only at the whim of those who would let them die in the street were it not for the gain that can be squeezed from them.

A home that you can not control, that you cannot even be sure will exist with the turning of the seasons. Where stability and peace rot in calamity, exist only at the behest of faceless names that lace themselves throughout labyrinthine paperwork, chaining you to the front of a truck whose motion you cannot control.

Do you smell smoke? Do you smell the creeping ruin of a life, a stalking creature of unmaintained electricals, of cheap insulation, of cutting corners and missing fire alarms and unenforced safety regulations?

Do you see it creeping under the door to your bedroom as you sleep, the burning coals of its eyes regarding you in the supposed safety of your home, not indifferent but *hungry*, eager to take everything from you, to burn down your life in any sense it can reach.

Can you hear the crackling promise of kindled despair that it whispers into your uneasy, dreaming ear?

Sabina senses it, feels it drawing near.

How long has she lived here? How long have these cramped, dingy rooms in the back of this – sprawling rundown tenement been the place her heart calls home?

She cannot recall, but long enough for her to grow into love for it, to cherish every rusted appliance, every crumbling piece of plasterboard, every flickering lightbulb.

Even as the widening cracks and spreading mold fill her heart with dread, they gently, slowly, inch by inch approach the room where her parents lie sleeping.

Sabina – cannot picture their faces, but knows that should they wake to see the state of the place, their anger would be blistering. She sits there on the ratty, torn sofa, trying to bring herself to stand up, to *do* something about the place that is crumbling around her.

But she is locked there by the sure knowledge that anything she touches could result in the loss of any small stability she has. She barely notices how hot her tears are becoming.

Which sense is the first to warn her? What nerves are the first ones to fire the white-hot bolts of agonizing panic through Sabina's body? Does she smell it, the rising smoke? A slow and subtle scent, like someone's burned their toast, and – is that hair?

Does she hear it, the distant roaring, like the soft growl of a lion who never stops approaching, spotted with shrieks and screams that might just be her imagination?

Does she see it, the glow of the flames, pulsing slow and steady, the dull orange of old streetlights, but somehow strong enough to push through the cracks around the front door?

Does she feel it, the rising prickly heat, like she has sat too close to an electric radiator for too long, and her skin has begun to redden and blossom before the bars into thick beads of sweat?

Or does she taste it in the back of her throat, the sick, queasy terror that tells her she knows *exactly* what is coming. Because it's all happened before.

Once again, the handle of the front door begins to glow red-hot, the metal bending and distorting as it melts. From the crack underneath, the fire drags itself forward, curling and caressing the rough coir of the mat that cheerily announced *'Welcome Home!'*

Its movements are flickering, rhythmic, almost hypnotic, and as her mind *screams* at her to stand, to run, to escape, she simply sits there, eyes locked on the dancing lights emerging around her front door.

She smiles the same smile she did when she was a child, staring at the bonfire at camp, though every nerve in her body is alight with fear.

Then the welcome mat ignites completely, in an instant turning from a gentle smoulder to a gout of flame, and whatever strange compulsion holds her in place snaps like a wire cable.

She leaps to her feet and starts screaming, calling for help for her parents. She runs to the door to their room but as she approaches she can already feel the heat wafting out from behind it. She can hear them crying out in agony, begging for her to save them as their

pain crescendos.

She can smell the oily reek of charred skin as they call to her: *"We're burning! We're* burning*! Oh please, god, Sabina; we're* burning*!"*

She grabs the handle, ignoring the sizzling of her own flesh and pushing through the lancing needles of torment to force it down, trying to free her unseen parents. But the door latch never really aligned properly, you see. The landlord always said he was going to get it fixed, and – it refuses to open.

[We hear all of this as it's happening in the background, minus any actual voices. The sizzling, the growing fire, the creaking and groaning of the flat – it's there. *We're* there.]

Sabina pounds helplessly on the smoking wood as the voices of her parents go quiet. Pushing down a grief that threatens to overwhelm her senses, she charges to the window, rushing to reach the old fire escape beyond.

The window frame never really opened properly, you see. The landlord always said he was going to get it fixed. And it judders as she tries to force it open, freezing a few inches from the bottom.

Sabina pushes all her might into it but the glass cracks and shatters, peppering her with razor-sharp shards, cutting her face to ribbons.

She stumbles, trying to climb through the jagged window

regardless, and she can feel the cool iron of the fire escape, a moment of blessed relief that shines through her suffering.

But the fire escape was always really rusty, you see. The landlord always said he was going to replace it. And at the first tiny bit of weight she puts upon it, she can feel the fastenings pop out of the old brick one by one, and her salvation tumbles away into the impossible distance below.

What floor was her flat on again? Surely it can't be this high.

Falling back into the inferno that is now her home, Sabina dashes over to the laughably small fire extinguisher the landlord begrudgingly provided. It is sputtering and empty.

She runs to the sink, to the tap that has always made that unpleasant grinding sound, and turning it, unleashes only a slow trickle of a thick, dark, oozing substance that smells faintly of *gas*.

Limping and desperate, she turns to see her furniture in flames, the bookshelves full of memories that she can't quite place but *knows* are precious to her curl and float away as ash. The photos on the wall of her family –

[A static begins to rise. And then:]

MARTIN

(faint in the background, but shouting) John!

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

(continuing) – whose faces seem indistinct but she knows that –

MARTIN

(background) John!

[The static is still steadily rising in volume.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

(continuing) – she loves, begin to blacken as the glass –

MARTIN

(background) John!

[He coughs.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

(continuing) – pops out of the frame.

Her home is being eaten alive by –

MARTIN

(overlapping, coming into focus) John, you idiot! Please go back!

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

(continuing) – this devouring Desolation, and she –

MARTIN

JOHN!

[He *slaps* the Archivist.]

[Somewhere, another fire escape crumples. People scream.]

MARTIN

She's *here*.

[A thunder-like crackling.]

ARCHIVIST

Hello, Jude.

JUDE PERRY

Fancy seeing you both here. *(sarcasm)* To what, exactly, do I owe the pleasure – the *honor* – of being graced by the great and powerful Archivist, harbinger of this new world and his, mm… *(deliberately obtuse)* …*valet?*

ARCHIVIST

Naturally, we came to see you.

[Jude inhales.]

JUDE

What a treat.

[Martin coughs in the background. It's wheezy.]

ARCHIVIST

I have a question for you. I've been wondering: did you know what you were doing?

[Martin continues to cough; he's picking up steam.]

JUDE

Excuse me?

ARCHIVIST

When you burned me. Marked me with… Did you know it would lead to – all this?

JUDE

(unimpressed) You came all this way just to ask that?

ARCHIVIST

Answer the question.

[Martin coughs again.]

JUDE

If you want to know *so* badly, why don't you just reach into my head and pull it out?

ARCHIVIST

Because I want to hear you say it. Willingly.

JUDE

What difference does it make if –

ARCHIVIST

(snapping) Just answer the damn question!

[Slight pause.]

JUDE

No. I had no idea.

ARCHIVIST

So why did you do it?

JUDE

Why d'you *think*? Because I wanted to hurt you.

[Martin coughs.]

JUDE

Because you were annoying and I didn't *like* you, so I *hurt* you.

ARCHIVIST

And if you had?

JUDE

But I didn't. Look, I *don't care*, okay?

[Martin keeps coughing.]

JUDE

I just – I don't. Raking over the past like it matters, like it *means* anything. The past is dead, Archivist: ashes in the wind.

We're. Here. Now. And that's it.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose you're right.

[Coughing.]

JUDE

So the *real* question is: What happens now?

[The fire rushes up in volume and intensity.]

MARTIN

John, look out!

JUDE

What's wrong? Scared of a little flame?

[Martin breathing comes out shaky, scrambled.]

JUDE

(delighted) Oh, you *are*, aren't you?

[She laughs.]

JUDE

How pathetic.

MARTIN

(high) Screw you!

ARCHIVIST

Leave him alone.

JUDE

(to Archivist) You're not scared, though, are you, *Archivist?*

ARCHIVIST

I can feel the pain of every person you have trapped here. My own isn't all that different.

JUDE

Yeah, but you *like* seeing their pain, don't you? Their fear?

[Briefest of pauses.]

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

JUDE

You and your stupid Eye, *god*, you make me sick! Lording it over everybody like you own the place? You're just *leeches*. Voyeurs. Parasites on the *real* monsters.

[Martin coughs.]

ARCHIVIST

Enough.

[Beat.]

JUDE

(whatever) Fine. Just messing around! Wouldn't want to keep you from your *oh*-so-special business, your *holiness*.

ARCHIVIST

I wouldn't worry about that: I'm *right where I want to be*.

JUDE

What's that supposed to mean?

ARCHIVIST

I'm here for you, Jude. To end you.

JUDE

What? No! No way.

[Martin's breath hitches, and then he's wheezing again.]

JUDE

You won. What would be the point of… *(trailing off)* You're *bluffing*.

ARCHIVIST

You know I'm not. You're already afraid.

[The crackling of the flames increases in intensity.]

JUDE

Oh, I see. I get it. You finally get a sniff of power, and the first thing you do is try to settle some old scores.

[She doesn't *sound* afraid. Martin continues to cough.]

JUDE

(enjoying this) Play the *big man;* get off on good old-fashioned *petty* revenge.

ARCHIVIST

(not in the mood for games) I'd have thought that was a mindset you would appreciate. Now, *feel* it. All the terror and pain you've inflicted.

JUDE

*(shut **up**)* Oh, *piss* off –

[She cuts herself off with a gasp. She's *feeling* it.]

[When she starts talking this time, she's bargaining.]

JUDE

Look, look. Wait. Right? I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have burned your hand.

[Her words are almost slurred.]

ARCHIVIST

(unforgiving) No. You shouldn't have.

JUDE

(slowly) Please don't kill me, I – *sure*, I –

[Martin coughs.]

JUDE

– moan about the Eye; who doesn't? But – we've won, both of us! And that's great.

[In the background, ever so slightly under all the fire, we hear the high-pitched whine of the Archivist's new top layer of static. The squeaky one, the one that signals something *big*.]

JUDE

If I'd known, would I still have marked you? Yes. I would. I'm… happy in this world. I belong here.

And so do you.

[Martin *coughs.* And coughs, and coughs, and coughs. It sounds like he's hacking his own lungs up. It sounds *bad*.]

[The static is building.]

[As Jude keeps going, her breaths come in gasps and]

JUDE

(somewhat of a laugh) Listen, *listen.* You're enjoying this, right? Of course you are. You want to use those powers of yours to *hurt* people. You want to murder *everybody* who can't fight back at you now?

I can help you.

[But even as she offers, the beginnings of the glitching that warns it's all about to be over start to flicker into audible territory.]

MARTIN

(half screaming) Just DIE already!

JUDE

You're not – *better* – *(audibly struggling)* than – me!

[She yells. The glitching crescendos. It bursts, just like it had with the Not!Sasha.]

[And then, quicker than it came, it fades.]

[The Archivist exhales.]

[Martin's breaths come fast and shaky.]

MARTIN

Is it? –

ARCHIVIST

It's over.

[The flames still crackle on.]

ARCHIVIST

She's gone.

MARTIN

The fires are still here. Doesn't look like much has changed.

ARCHIVIST

No. I suppose not.

[Another fire escape crumples.]

MARTIN

Let's just get out of here.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG170 – Recollection

Statement ########–10

[INT. A HOUSE]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[There's the creaking air of a large house. A few drawn-out shuffles of movement. The groaning floorboards of languid motions as someone moves across the floor. Underneath it all, the obtrusive tick-tock tick-tock of a clock.]

[A static builds.]

[The movement stops.]

[When Martin speaks, his voice is just the slightest bit echoey.]

MARTIN

Oh! Hello. *(bit of a halting laugh)* …What are you? Do I – Do I know you? *(heh)* Can't –

[The floorboards creak as he shifts.]

MARTIN

Can't tell through the – fog, sometimes. You feel – n,not friendly. Familiar?

Shape of you in my hand. I talk to you, don't I? We talk. What do we – do we say? *(under breath) Can't quite* –

[Movement.]

MARTIN

(normal) Th-There's something there, but I just can't see it.

Anyway. *(slight sigh)* Ni-Nice to sit down. Take a load off.

[He sits down in a chair with a *scoot*.]

MARTIN

Not a comfortable chair, of course. No-None of them are, here. I've – I've been all over this house looking for a nice place to sit. *(unsure)* I – think.

Is that what I was looking for? *(remembers himself)* Um. Ei-Either way, this place is so huge… so… empty, by the time you find your way to anything at all, you've probably earned a sit-down.

[He lets out a small laugh.]

[Then there's a creaking sound – like a door opening? Or just the floor and walls again?]

MARTIN

(small laugh) I don't think there's anyone else here, I –

[Another creak.]

MARTIN

Pro-Probably never has been. Not that I can remember, at least.

[The wind/air begins to pick up.]

MARTIN

Is it my house?

It must be, right? It must be, 'cause – why else would I be here?

You don't just wander around other people's houses alone; you don't just…

You don't just… just wander. *(under breath, smaller) No…*

[He trails off.]

MARTIN

(bit dazed) What, what was I saying? I don't…

[A squeak – again, possibly a door – and some background rattling.]

MARTIN

(to tape) Do *you* remember? You store them, I suppose. Keep, keep stuff locked up in those little wheels. That's memory, isn't it? *(movement)* Computers used to be like you. Big, whirring things with loads of – uh, tape. They called that memory.

But it's not – not, not really; it's just numbers and… *(trails off)* *(movement)*

Maybe you're blank as well, same as me.

Are you? Can you remember what I've already said, – *(movement)* – cause I – I, I can't; the words keep creeping away? Like – like, like when I try to think back, to focus – um, focus on – um –

[He's trying very hard to remember.]

[Static swells.]

MARTIN

(pleasantly surprised) Oh, oh! Oh. Hello! What are you; I can't quite – see. You feel – familiar. Do I know you, do we talk?

I hope so. *(slight laugh)* It's good to talk with people. It's – hm.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

Oh, I, I met someone; did I tell you? *(movement)* He's – I, I don't know. I like him. He doesn't like me, though. Not really. I don't blame him.

I don't like me sometimes, and I *am* me. Plus he's – he's my, my boss? Is that right?

Ei, Ei,Either way, it's probably for the best. Wouldn't really be appropriate. You don't need to worry; I'm not doodling his name on my desk or anything. *(heh)* His uh – his – his, um. His… name…

Wait.

[Squeak, like a door opening.]

MARTIN

Wait, what *is* his name? *(distressed)* I don't – *(more distressed, sharper) Why, wha– Why can't I remember his name?*

His, his face, I don't –

[More movement, and a thud. The door closing?]

[Martin steps into the next room.]

MARTIN

(still audibly agitated) Wh-Where am I? This, This isn't my house!

H-Hello?

I don't like it here. I can't see anything with all this –

[He moves something that sounds like a curtain on a metal rod aside.]

MARTIN

This fog; this – this is nothing out the windows, and it's, it's so cold.

[The rushing of the air increases in volume.]

MARTIN

(audibly shivering) The fireplace is dead and the curtains… there are mirrors but no…

No. Not mirrors.

Someone's standing in them but I don't, I don't know who.

That face, who is… who is that? *(under breath)* I need to sit down.

[He walks to find a chair, his breaths coming slightly shakier and faster, though still soft in volume.]

[The chair creaks as he sits in it.]

[The clock ticks at a slightly different pace.]

[A static rises.]

MARTIN

(pleasant surprise) Oh! Oh, hello. *(small laugh)* Who are you, then?

Hmm. Hm. Can't quite make out a – A tape recorder? *(heh)* Can't remember the last time I used a –

[Creak.]

MARTIN

Hm. Blast from the past! Familiar…

Well, it's good to have someone to talk to. Otherwise you can go strange, you… I, I don't…

Hm. What was I saying?

This… this chair, – *(an *ugh* and chair scraping back)* – really isn't comfortable. I had a look-round for better places to sit – did I tell you that? – but it's, it's big house.

My house, I think. *(heh)* Nowhere comfortable. So I suppose this is it.

It *is* my house, isn't it? Must be. Must be.

I don't really remember. Just… so tired. It's hard to think when you're this tired, hard to… to focus.

No, no, no, no, not, not tiredness, just the – fog. I – can't see through the fog, and it – it *smells*! *(movement) (sniff)*

What – *(sniff)* What *is* that? Damp, sort of – chemical, almost. *(larger sniff)* I don't like it.

Why does my house smell like that, I – It can't be *my* house.

[He starts walking again.]

MARTIN

No, no, no; my, *(sniff)* my – *(sniff)* My house doesn't smell like this! My house smells… s-smells different. *(pause)* It's sort of weird, isn't it? Smell can trigger memory so… powerfully. Like this one, it, it makes me think of – *(large inhale)* Hm. *(inhale)* Hm. I – I don't know. Is it a person? A place?

No, no; people – people don't smell like that. Besides, I'm all alone.

[Creak.]

MARTIN

I'm all – *(movement)* I'm all alone. *(distressed)* Why – Why am I

alone? I, I shouldn't be alone; there should be people! It's such a – such a big house, *my house* – there mu– there must be other people! People who care!

[Opening and creaking of the door, more walking.]

MARTIN

Hello?

[He keeps going. The door creaks behind him.]

MARTIN

He-Hello?

[He keeps walking.]

MARTIN

All these rooms… I think they're the same as this one. I, I don't know why I'd decorate my house like this; I don't *like it!* I like – *(breaking off)* Wh– I, It's not my home; it *can't* be. Do I have a home? This – this place feels like it's all for me, I think, but I don't –

[Door creaks open.]

MARTIN

(shaky) I don't like it here.

It – It can't be cheap living here, house this big. I really need a job.

Started lying on my CV; did I tell you that. I didn't want to. I-I mean I tried to be a good person, but we're really up against it, and I – and I – I know they're going to find me out; I just know it.

They'll ask something, or I'll say something stupid, and then – and then they'll know. They'll know, and then – *(shaky exhale) (under breath)* Oh, [unintelligible] *(normal)* What am I doing; I can't afford a place like this! I need money, not just for me, but for – for… *(suddenly less agitated)* Wait. Wait, no; it is – it *is* just me, isn't it? It's always been just me.

[The same static as always begins to rise from the background.]

MARTIN

No… No, no, no, that's not right! I-I'm not alone, no! Not alone, there's – there's – J-J-John? John. *(suddenly realizing)* John! John!

[A thump. Martin starts walking.]

MARTIN

(suddenly to John, frantic) John? John, I'm here; can you hear me? I can't – it's – it's this place, I – wh-where are you; I need you, I nee– *(laugh, but humorless)* – I need you, John.

[There's an uneasy discordant tone playing in the background.]

MARTIN

Where – Where did you go.

[A couple more steps.]

MARTIN

(voice about to break) Please don't leave me. I can't do this on my own. Please. *(inhale that could be a sob)* I'm not enough on my own.

Alone. *(small, shaky)* All. All alone.

[He starts to cry, softly, as he walks on. There's some rustled movement.]

[And then – the static rises.]

MARTIN

(pleasant surprise) Oh. Oh, hello. What's this?

Wow, retro! What are you up to, little buddy; just – listening?

That's okay. It's nice to have someone to talk to.

[Creak.]

MARTIN

Maybe you can keep a better handle on things than me.

It's this fog, you know? Makes it so hard to *see*. *(under breath)* WhatwasIsaying? *(normal)* I feel like there's somewhere I need to *be*. But no, no; this is *my* house; where else would I need to be?

I just –

[*Scoot.*]

MARTIN

I wish I had comfortable chairs. *(inhale)* Would be nice to have somewhere relaxing to sit down. Rest a bit when Mum's asleep.

Did I tell you about my mum?

[Creak.]

MARTIN

(half-whisper) We should try to keep quiet actually, you know. Make sure not to wake her. The drugs – they, they hit her pretty hard, but – if you make enough noise and she wakes up, and – *(quieter)* and yeah, it's not good. *(bravado)* Not a good time!

I-I *know* she loves me; I-I *know* she does.

But that doesn't make it easy. There's always so much to do, and

I'm *always* forgetting something.

I do try, you know? I mean, I *really* try to keep on top of things, but I'm just – I'm just so forgetful, and she – she –

Sometimes I wonder if I forget things on purpose. Easier not to think about them, I guess. Easier to just let them… slip away. They can't hurt you if you don't think about them; they can't shout at you or call you names. *(increasingly emotional)* And I, I always think of Mum's face when I've done something wrong, and I – *(dead sober)* Wait.

[He shifts.]

MARTIN

Wait, her face, I – I don't – I don't remember her face.

Did – Did she have a face? *(berating)* D-Don't – Don't be stupid, Martin; of course she had a *face! (increasingly agitated)* You just can't remember it 'cause – *(breathing heavy)* 'Cause you're a *bad son*; because you left you left her to rot in – *(brief pause) (despondent)*

Wh-Where did she go?

She didn't like it; *I* didn't like it. S-Smelled. It smelled like –

Where am I? This isn't right; I shouldn't be here; I should be –

Somewhere, someone that – there, there are people who trust me, people who love me, so why can't I remember them? Why, why

can't I see them?

Sasha. Yeah! Yeah, yeah, I, I remember; there was – there was Sasha! I can see her face!

No – no, wait, no; not, not Sasha, some – something else. The thing that *isn't* Sasha, that, that took her, and, and made her – something else, and her – face, her – her face, I can still see it; it's – laughing.

[He's breathing heavier, now.]

MARTIN

Telling me that there's – there's nobody else. I'm alone. The only people who could ever stand to be around me are gone. Even from my mind. *(tearful)* Where is this place? So cold. And I can't see anything through all this – *fog. (hm)* I must have – left the window open. *(struggles with the next word)* L, L-L,Let the fog in.

Oh, my heating bills must be through the roof, *stupid*; can't afford that!

At least I've got a job now; did I tell you I've got a job? I mean, the interview was weird, I-I don't really remember the man who talked to me. Just his *eyes*.

They stared at me. Th-Through me, and – and I knew *he* knew what I had done.

God. I was so *scared*, but then he smiled, and shook my hand.

What was his *name?*

He said I *'had the job,' (heh)* that he *'looked forward to working with me.'*

I was still so scared I could barely move my arm. I was so terrified I'd let him down.

[The static is once again starting to rise.]

MARTIN

And then I met John, and I – *(realization)* John – John! John! John? John, I'm here! John, I-I think I'm lost, I think – I don't – *(losing his grasp) John.*

[But he's losing his words again.]

[Another creak.]

[The clock ticks on.]

[The static rises again with a little squeak.]

MARTIN

(pleasant surprise) Oh, he-hello! What are you?

Huh. Didn't even know I had a tape recorder. Do you still work, or…

[He taps on it.]

MARTIN

Yeah, seems like you're running all right. *(beat) Hey*, I should do some poetry! You could give it a little, little bit of that *funky* lo-fi goodness! All the cool poets love a bit of tape hiss, right?

Maybe find somewhere different to sit, though.

[He scoots out of the chair.]

MARTIN

(under breath) Hate these chairs. Don't even know where I *got* them.

Did I tell you I've been writing poetry? N,Nothing much really, just fragments, thoughts. Haven't written anything like it since I was a *teenager*, – *(small laugh)* – but my new job's a lot, and – I don't know. Something about that place, it just – it makes me feel weird?

But – the sort of weird you just have to *get out* somehow.

Maybe I – Maybe I should do some open mics, or something. Just for me, really, I think.

Oh! You – You want to hear some? *(heh) (movement)*

Uh – yeah! Yeah, okay, sure; well, I can – No. No, wait, no that – *(movement)* Hm, they're *gone*; that's weird. I thought – I, I can feel them, but the words, they just – just wash away.

Hm.

I, I m – I suppose *that's* quite poetic actually, but – *(sigh)* Nothing else there.

I don't like this place. *(exhale)* It's so cold, and, and the logs in the fireplace are damp from the mist. I don't know how I'd even *light* them, and they – they smell really bad, like they're wet *dirt*.

Makes me think of – hm.

When I was nine, my grandad died. Did I tell you that? I went to the funeral, and the coffin was so – *(small laugh) shiny*. It was already sealed.

But on top there was a photo of a – young man. Someone who looked *almost* like my grandad, but – it, it wasn't him. It wasn't… finished? Not yet.

No, and – and I suddenly began to panic, because I was trying to remember what he looked like, his, his face, but I couldn't do it. And I knew I'd never see him again.

He loved me and I couldn't even remember his *face!*

(breathing heavy) It was – It was a horrid, drizzly morning, that day, and they put him in the ground and he – he smelled like *earth*. Cold, damp soil. *(squeak, movement)* What was I saying?

Ah – S, Sorry – *(sorry exhale)* It's just this *chair*-

[Squeak and movement sounds as he gets up.]

MARTIN

– it's so hard to concentrate when you're uncomfortable, isn't it?

[He sighs.]

[A few more creaks.]

[The static rises.]

MARTIN

Now, I think – Hey, hang on. Where did you come from?

Tape recorder. (heh) What, you want me to give you a statement, I –

[The static *presses*.]

MARTIN

(deadened voice) Why. The Eye has won. It can already see everything; it wouldn't *need* a – w-wouldn't need a –

[The static fades.]

MARTIN

(stuttering, stumbling) Well it's just, nice to talk to someone, I guess.

No one real ever really listens to me anyway.

Oh, they nod and respond and say *'No, Martin,'* or *'Not now, Martin*,' or *'Leave it, Martin –'* but, funny thing is – *(false bright)* I didn't ask them to do anything!

Just wanted to see if they needed a hand. *(heh, but humorless)* Is that me? *(unsure)* Is – Is that me? Martin? Martin. *Maar*tin. *(close to John's pronunciation) Mar*tin.

Doesn't sound right. But who else would I be? *(hm)* Whoever owns this house, I guess. It certainly doesn't *seem* like the kind of place that somebody called *Maar*tin would live.

Martin.

It feels like a small name. One that wants to be warm and happy. Not like *here*.

[Creak.]

MARTIN

You know, I've wandered around *all* these rooms, and – they all just make me feel alone.

They scare me.

Even when I find someone else, I feel alone. Did I tell you?

I – found someone else, wandering around. They were all – thin and

grey. Faded. Like they'd been here for ages. I think they'd been – crying, but it's so hard to tell through the fog.

I tried to talk to them, but it was just – just *difficult*! I asked who they were, and they – looked at me like they had no idea what I was talking about.

"What's your name?" I said, "Your name? You must have a *name!*" but they just – shrugged, and I – and – *(movement)* And they gestured at me. Like they wanted to know *my* name, and I – th– I couldn't tell them! I couldn't remember!

"Is this your house?" I asked, and they said, they said yes. But – then they stopped, and shook their head. And, and then they started to laugh.

Quietly, for a bit, and then they cried. And they wouldn't stop. I – I –

They asked me who they were, if there was anyone looking for them. If there was anybody left who even cared, but I – I didn't know. I, I didn't know, and I –

[His voice is shaking. He's clearly emotional.]

MARTIN

(tearful) I ran away – I had to run away! *(sob)* I, I had to go and have a sit-down, okay? I just – *(creak, movement)* I just wish I had thought to buy some nicer chairs.

Still. Not like I've got guests coming, is it? *(shaky breath)* The house is empty, and, and honestly? I – I can't think of anyone in the world who would care if I lived or died.

[The clock ticks on, insistent and unyielding.]

MARTIN

(sob, quiet) I-I-I'm *scared*. I think this fog is doing something to me; I can't – *(movement)* I'm losing myself, and I – and I don't know if I mind?

Maybe I deserve it. *(shaky breath)* So much of what's behind the fog hurts. So much of it just makes me wanna curl up with *pain* and *embarrassment* and –

Maybe the fog's here because I want it here.

Is that why I opened the windows?

Maybe I asked the fog to come. *(beat)* No. No, no – no, no, no, that's not true, I – I remember! Hundreds, thousands of lost souls, wandering the halls. Hollow memories, with eyes full of tears.

I've seen them. *(shaky)* They're all trying to remember. T-To recall, to picture someone, *anyone* who loves them, and their hearts are all full of *fear*.

Afraid that those people are gone forever. That maybe – maybe they never existed at all. *(agitated)* Why am I *here?*

I-I fell behind. I was – I was too slow, and, and, and the fog caught up; I was following. Al-Always following, never leading. *Never* leading.

Why did he leave me behind? D-Did he? Who are – Wh– Who *are* you? Who am –? *(realization, movement)* J-J-John.

[The static kicks in again.]

MARTIN

John, John. Yes. John, I remember him. *(shaky exhale)* I need to, I need to keep him here. If he can find me, I – he, he knows enough; surely he *Knows* enough to find me, but I can't – *(struggling)* If I forget him, if, if I forget – me – maybe – maybe there's nothing left to Know. No one to find.

[Creaking movement.]

MARTIN

Talking helps. I got you all here to listen; *(tap)* Just, just don't stop talking.

You – You are *Martin Blackwood*. Yes. You, you didn't choose to be here. John is coming. *(stronger)* I am Martin Blackwood, and I am *not* lonely anymore; I am ***not*** lonely anymore. *(voice shaking with effort)* I want to have friends; I – no, I ***have*** friends. I-I'm in *love*. *(heh)* I am in love, and I will not forget that; I will ***not*** forget.

*(**stronger**)* I am *Martin Black–*

ARCHIVIST

(far off, calling) Martin!

MARTIN

Wai– wh– John?

ARCHIVIST

(getting closer) Martin! Martin?

MARTIN

John! John, over here!

[And the static is growing louder.]

ARCHIVIST

Oh! Martin, hold on, I, I, I'm coming; I just –

[Footsteps.]

ARCHIVIST (ON MIC)

(relieved) Oh, Martin; thank god, I – I was –

[And it sounds like he's embracing him]

ARCHIVIST

I, I thought you were behind me.

[Martin lets out a soft *oh*.]

MARTIN

I thought you'd left me behind. Gone on without me.

ARCHIVIST

No, never. N-Never, I, I just –

[He pulls back from the hug.]

ARCHIVIST

I, I didn't want to – Look too h– I,I,I promised I wouldn't Know you, and, and with the fog, and, and all the rooms, I, I just – I lost you; I'm – *(inhale)* I'm sorry.

MARTIN

It's okay.

[A beat of just their exhales.]

ARCHIVIST

No, I – I tried to use the – *(sigh)* to Know where you were, but it

was – you, you were faint. It was so strange; it took me so long just to find you.

[Movement.]

MARTIN

John, it's – okay. I promise, it's okay. This place tried; it *really* did, and honestly, I – *(inhale)* I wanted to believe it.

But I didn't.

ARCHIVIST

This… place, i, it –

[The static *increases*.]

ARCHIVIST

My god.

[The static fades.]

MARTIN

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

M-Martin – if you – did. I,If you wanted to forget a,all of it, stay

here and just – escape.

[The wind rushes in the background.]

ARCHIVIST

I-I would understand.

[Beat.]

MARTIN

N,No. It's comforting here, leaving all those – painful memories behind, but – *(slight movement)* It's not a good comfort, it's – i,it's the kind that makes you fade, makes you dim and – distant.

ARCHIVIST

(barely a whisper) Okay. *(pause, normal)* Okay, good; I – *(fortifying breath)* I wanted to make sure you knew what this place was.

MARTIN

It's the Lonely, John. It's me.

ARCHIVIST

Not anymore.

[Martin makes a pleased little *hm.*]

MARTIN

No. *(long inhale)* No, not anymore.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG171 – The Gardener

Statement ########-11

[EXT. A GARDEN, JARED HOPWORTH'S DOMAIN]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Birds chirp happily, twittering about. It sounds like a lovely day, by all accounts.]

[Someone is groaning in pain.]

[We hear some clothing movements, walking. Then:]

ARCHIVIST

Don't. Touch. Anything.

MARTIN

I wasn't planning to.

[He gives a little *heh* at the end.]

MARTIN

Are they still… alive?

ARCHIVIST

More or less. They're certainly still aware. But they're just the compost. The pot from which the trees grow.

[As he speaks, there's another gasping voice.]

[The birds continue to trill.]

MARTIN

I didn't think there were that many bones *in* a human body.

ARCHIVIST

(half a laugh) Normally there aren't. *(exhale)* It takes a skilled gardener to get them to grow like this. The curling, cascading intricacies of collagen and marrow.

[Something shifts – a footstep, in dirt?]

ARCHIVIST

It takes devotion –

MARTIN

John.

[Slight pause.]

ARCHIVIST

S-Sorry.

MARTIN

You sound like you think they're beautiful.

[More steps.]

ARCHIVIST

Don't you?

[Something creaks or cracks.]

MARTIN

Is he here?

ARCHIVIST

(inhale) Up ahead.

[Someone else cries out. The birds are happy as ever. And, as they get closer, it turns out someone is whistling, a joyful little tune.]

[It's Jared Hopworth.]

JARED HOPWORTH

(to one of his person-plant-things) Look at this.

[He makes a set of tch-ing sounds of disapproval. You can practically hear him shaking his head.]

JARED

It's like you're *trying* to grow ugly. That won't *do*. You're better than *that*.

[The man-person-plant-thing groans again.]

JARED

Not to worry friend; no harm done. Just a bit of pruning will set you right.

[He clips something. The person-plant *yells*.]

[Jared shushes them as they continue to do so. They start crying, over some fleshy sounds. Water burbles.]

JARED

[No real fuss.] Should sort you right out. Soon you'll be good as new.

[The person-thing continues to whimper in the background.]

JARED

Better, even. You just need to – reach down inside and – really *feel* that fear. Let it guide how you grow. You'll feel it in your –

[He stops, snickers.]

JARED

Bones.

[And then he starts to laugh in earnest, the person still obviously in pain behind it all.]

[Something shifts, and he starts the whistling up again, rattling around what sounds like a metal wheelbarrow until –]

ARCHIVIST

Jared Hopworth.

[The whistling cuts off. The wheelbarrow – or whatever it is – rolls to a stop. Jared sets it down.]

JARED

Sure. Why not? If you're still clinging so hard to names.

ARCHIVIST

You know why I'm here?

[In the background, we still hear the light tinkle of a bell, or a windchime, and some vague moans here and there.]

JARED

I can *guess*. Took a bit to find out which rib was aching, but when I did – well. Obviously. *(shifting the wheelbarrow)* Why shouldn't you want it back?

ARCHIVIST

(puff of an exhale, almost a laugh) It's too late for that now.

JARED

Not really. But – whatever.

[Pause.]

JARED

(dismissive) Oh, and who's this? Your *boyfriend?*

[This is clearly meant to be a diss.]

MARTIN

Um –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Yes, actually.

JARED

(Ah!) Oh. Hm.

[In the background, a flute plays off-key.]

JARED

So is there any way this doesn't end in me dead? I'm guessing that's on the docket if you're here. Unless you're just here to *smell the flowers*.

[The windchimes clatter.]

ARCHIVIST

No. I can't let you carry on like this.

What happened, Jared? I thought you only worked on the willing.

JARED

What? Says who? *(realizing) Ohhh*, the *gym!* Ha! I mean, yeah, they wanted to change, but they were still *scared*. First at what I'd do to them, then at what would happen if the world couldn't handle their beautiful new bodies.

Not like I was doing it out of the goodness of my heart.

[He snorts.]

JARED

Hearts.

Anyway. Willing. Unwilling. Don't work like that anymore, does it? You made sure of that.

MARTIN

That's – not fair.

JARED

And what?

MARTIN

I – I – Mm, uh –

JARED

[S'right.] Don't really matter now, does it?

ARCHIVIST

No. No, it doesn't.

[Jared lets out a large *pfffft* sound. Things crack – he's definitely restructuring his body.]

MARTIN

(ah!) O-kay.

JARED

Right. So are we doing this or what? I reckon I can get a few good hits in before I go down. Give you a little something to remember me by.

ARCHIVIST

(dead serious) No you won't.

[Jared huffs a laugh.]

JARED

No, maybe not. But you've gotta try, haven't you?

MARTIN

Please don't.

JARED

What?

MARTIN

You've already made your mark.

[Jared pauses, surprised. Then he huffs a laugh again:]

JARED

Fine. Consider it a favor. But I want something in return. Before he does it.

[Squelch.]

MARTIN

Um –

ARCHIVIST

Alright. Let's hear it.

JARED

You still do that talk-y thing? You know, drink up all the fear and spit it back out?

ARCHIVIST

Sort of, yes.

JARED

Alright. Well, I'd like to hear about my garden.

[Beat.]

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

MARTIN

Look, if this is some kind of trick –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) It isn't.

[Squelchy-grinding as Jared shifts.]

JARED

Don't fret yourself, little man. Just thought it might be *nice*, is all.

[Pause. The birds chirp.]

[And the static rises.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Cultivation notes for *Fuertisium reese.*[1] Commonly known as the Gristlebloom Orchid.

[As the Archivist begins the statement, his voice takes on the quality of what you might hear on a nature documentary, or a scientific log.]

[Under the statement, we hear the fleshy sounds that might

accompany the growth of one of Jared's person-plant-things.]

A popular feature in any mortal garden, the striking petals that spring from the stems of the Gristlebloom are certainly dramatic, stretched and straining as they are in a kaleidoscope of reds and pinks and browns around the pale cream of bony stalk.

While proper conditions for development can be tricky to get precisely right, caution should be exercised as – should an ideal environment be created – this plant can grow and grow and grow.

[Creak.]

The soil should be prepared first, a rich and earthy cocktail of insecurity and self-hatred that allows the roots to twist and contort freely. The temperature should be kept the steady, humid warmth of air conditioners struggling to cope with the perspiration of a dozen bodies pushing themselves too hard, while the lights must be kept at a harsh, fluorescent glare.

Counterintuitively, growth is most effective when the orchid is suffering from aggressive dehydration, and it is vitally important that the air roots be rarely praised, and only for the flowers' appearance and growth.

Above all, the deepest fear must be laced throughout what the Gristlebloom Orchid is fed: That they're not enough. That their inadequacies are embedded all the way into their flesh, and they must always and forever be *more*.

This unspoken terror can be viewed in the intricate lattices that marble the gory petals of a well-cared for Gristlebloom as it expands and swells and grows to its full and bulbous potential.

Never let it believe itself good enough, and continue always to ensure the body that it is certain it must attain is that impossible, distended mess to which it will endlessly contort itself until it dominates your garden in its sheer, impossible, beautiful mass.

Even if there were mirrors in this place, Reese could not possibly recognize himself. Not because anything that might once have registered as a human body has long since blossomed into sinewy flowers and muscles and burst skin, but because – were he to see himself, the only image in his mind would be the him he was so afraid to be.

And the Gristlebloom Orchid grows.

The agonies of this gore-streaked orchid are pointedly exquisite as it willingly and keenly pushes its physical form past any recognizable point of pain and shuddering anxiety until it towers over your garden, dripping blood and bitter sweat.

[Squelch.]

Cultivation notes for *Gristleium patricia*.[2] Commonly known as the Bone Rose.

[More squelching.]

While the Gristlebloom Orchid may be the most *eye-catching* of the plants that you will find in the mortal garden, the Bone Rose is perhaps the most delicate.

Thin and brittle, it is constantly on the verge of collapsing under its own weight, even as its ossified stems reach and twist and stretch in a desperate attempt for closeness.

The soil for the Bone Rose must be thoroughly rotten, a mulch of corrupted romanticism turned toxic and watered by an uncertain desire that curls back upon the roots and feeds into it a single, constant, pulsing thought, an instinct that fuels every cell within the rose:

To be wanted you must be less.

The temperature should be kept cold for optimal development, the coldness of rejection, of hostile and pitying glances cast over a hated body. A coldness that creeps through the bones and lashes the vicious iciness to the flower's core.

Light should be unrelenting, allowing every flaw and mark and sag to be stared at and warped and ogled.

With this preparation, the Bone Rose will conceive a grotesque horror of its own flesh, of the skin and fats and all that makes a body present. It will tear and starve and leak until there is nought but bones, the hungry bones so desperate to be touched, to be held. To be wanted.

Patricia is beautiful at last, so sharp and narrow and hard. Her angles and creamy white entirety is the center of the garden for all to admire. But she strains and shakes and fears the wind that pushes and bends the brittle stiffness of the bones.

It takes every drop of her strength to keep herself aloft, to not collapse in a heap of splintered femur and broken rib. There is no moment of her new existence that is not a shuddering, terrified effort.

She is beautiful. And she cannot allow herself to lose that at any cost. She cannot shatter into fleshy ugliness again.

The Bone Rose, properly cultivated, will be a fearful and wonderful centerpiece for a carefully tended mortal garden.

Cultivation notes for *Cicadium leopold.*[3] Commonly known as the Cutaway Tulip.

At the edges of the mortal garden, if one is lucky, one may find the rare Cutaway Tulip, the pride of any diligent gardener.

While easy to grow to a small size with some casually applied insecurities, to create a true masterpiece of carved and peeled and sculpted flesh requires a lengthy and involved cultivation.

Ensuring a properly grotesque blossom, an elegant and graceful flowering, is more in the pruning than in the preparation.

The soil can be anything mulched in hostility to self-worth, and the light and temperature must simply be kept at a level to allow the

appropriate growth of an obsession.

An obsession, with the changing and hacking of itself, that from stem to root to petal it cuts and breaks and sticks itself into ever-new configurations and shapes, each a new summit of repulsive symmetry and stomach-churning perfection.

A perfection sought in the blades and the shears of the gardener. All the edge wielded by its own wildly waving roots, eagerly digging into a knotted and knitted form and pulling itself apart.

The Cutaway Tulip's growth is less reliant than other blooms on the moment-to-moment terror of themselves, the sharpened, pointed fear of a form you are appalled to look upon.

Instead, what must be grown and fed and watered is the lingering, nagging dread of falling short of what could be. At the final, glorious culmination that a body may someday achieve, the ever-retreating perfections that sit always on the tip of a knife.

But also growing with the flower must be that other dread: Not of perfection to be hunted, but of decay to be fled. The wrinkled, graying translucent marks of encroaching mortality, a body that seeks to turn all that look like you into a moldering parody.

And the fearful slicing and desperate stabbing that is no longer to seek the golden promise of an eternal beauty but a tearful attempt to rewind a spring that ticks itself ever looser with every snap of the clock face.

Leopold is aware of what he has become, of the bleeding, twitching caricature of a human body he inhabits, the ribbons of himself that are pruned and broken and woven into *dazzling* petals.

But as much as he is scared to his roots of the next form the shears will chop him into, even more he fears the spreading stagnation that moves through his skin like rot, the start of decline that can only be postponed by the mutilating torments of his gardener.

He would cry, but he has no idea where his tear ducts are anymore.

While initially a very intensive and time-consuming flower to grow, a well-cared for Cutaway Tulip can stand as a torn and wretched testament to the gardener's skill, especially if successfully brought to the point where it begins to operate and dissect itself.

Cultivation notes for *Sopranium maeve*.[4] Commonly known as the Lily of the Damned.

While a somewhat difficult flower to acquire the seeds for, the actual growing of a Lily of the Damned is a task that requires remarkably little input from the gardener, although, if it is to be a strong feature of the mortal garden, it must be regularly pulled up into fresh air.

Any soil works for a Lily of the Damned, though some contend a rough and damp texture causes them to blossom faster. The important aspect to bear in mind is to never allow the lily to forget its physical existence.

Temperatures can be hot or cold as long as it is uncomfortable, and light levels need only be high if the preoccupation with its body's presence has a visual component.

Most importantly, the absence of any transcendence or death should always be emphasized when watering or pruning.

Spirituality. Afterlife. Transhumanism, religion – all must be roundly dismissed or mocked, at all times with the clear conclusion that the meat from which the lily blooms is the only form of being it will ever enjoy.

The flowers that spring from a Lily of the Damned are… less predictable than those of other denizens of the mortal garden, being haphazard black growths of calcified fluid and sinuous, dangling nerves.

They can grow very fast, but are in no danger of dominating any arrangement, as they will by nature attempt to retreat beneath the soil, hiding the painful existence that horrifies them so from any that might be watching, including themselves.

Periodically, if you wish to display and grow your lily to its best advantage, you must seize whatever part of it remains above ground and *pull*, bringing it up into the open air.

Use as much force as you have available without worry of dislodging it entirely. The lily's roots go deep, and can withstand almost any attempt to dislodge them.

[A cracking, curling growing.]

This is Maeve's nightmare. There is no other word for it. To be trapped, unmoving, within the body that has betrayed her so often, feeling every sensation as it grows and warps and sprouts, never knowing what new mutation it will visit on her next.

She is unable to even hide. There is no promise of the peaceful sleep of the innocent dead, not the dream of a digital escape of the hell her body has become. She is here, and she is trapped in the same soft prison of skin she has *always* so despised.

While it will never be a focus piece for a mortal garden, the Lily of the Damned is a popular choice among experimental gardeners, as its almost indestructible nature allows them the opportunity to exercise a great deal of creativity in its cultivation.

The mortal garden grows and twists and screams and bleeds. It is loved by the hands that tend it, but that love sows only misery and fear.

It is the worst place that has ever been beautiful, and it should not exist.

[The static begins to simmer in the background. There are more crunchy rearrangement noises.]

[Jared takes a deep breath. Then he exhales, all juddery.]

JARED

Cheers for that.

ARCHIVIST

Don't.

MARTIN

John, are you – alright?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. Um, uh – Sorry.

JARED

Is it really that bad? Seeing what I've done here?

Or – *(heh)* Is it maybe that deep down, you think it's as beautiful as I do?

ARCHIVIST

*(*snapping*) Shut up!*

JARED

It's a shame. Who's gonna look after the garden when I'm gone? There are a few real pretty ones.

[Windchimes in the background.]

JARED

Who knows. Maybe they'll uproot and start landscaping themselves. That'd be nice.

Then again, maybe it'll just grow wild.

[The most bass layer of the Archivist's static seems to press in.]

ARCHIVIST

I don't. *Care.*

JARED

No. You don't, do you?

[Windchimes.]

ARCHIVIST

I *can't.* There's too many. I can't save everyone. *(small sound)* I can't save *anyone*.

JARED

If you say so. *(beat)* So. I guess that just leaves revenge, then, don't it?

Can't say I blame you. That's all life is, really, innit? Just people

using each other up.

ARCHIVIST

(snide) Spare me the crude *philosophy*.

[A noise in the distance. The static begins to build.]

JARED

(to garden) Grow well, my darlings. Grow well.

ARCHIVIST

(gritted) Feel it.

[A scraping-type sound, but distant.]

ARCHIVIST

Feel the terror and despair as your garden grows.

[As he speaks, Jared begins making strange burbling and gurgling noises, his body starting to shift and squelch.]

ARCHIVIST

(intense) Let it flow through you and *blossom*.

[Jared keeps making noises. The Archivist's words begin to glitch.]

ARCHIVIST

Just people, using each other up. ***Ceaseless Watcher, turn your gaze upon this thing and drink. Your. Fill.***

[Jared groans, deep and low, and the light glitching intensifies, turning into the same final glitch that eradicated the apocalypse of the Not!Sasha and Jude Perry before him.]

[And then, one final bass boost later – it's over. The Archivist gasps a bit for breath, but –]

MARTIN

(worried) John?

ARCHIVIST

I'm here.

MARTIN

Are you okay?

[One of the plant-person-things groans in the background.]

ARCHIVIST

I'm –

[It groans again.]

ARCHIVIST

(not great) Great. You?

MARTIN

(bit of a laugh) I really thought this one would be messier.

ARCHIVIST

What do you mean?

MARTIN

Well I mean – he's a Flesh – thing, right? I thought he'd be all meat and blood and gore and all that.

ARCHIVIST

(bit of a laugh) Apparently not.

MARTIN

He didn't even put up a *fight.*

ARCHIVIST

No.

[Another one of the plant-people-things in the background groans. More squelching. A footstep in the dirt.]

MARTIN

So what now?

ARCHIVIST

Carry on, I guess.

MARTIN

Yeah.

[The Archivist shoulders his bag, prepares to start walking.]

MARTIN

John!

ARCHIVIST

Yeah?

MARTIN

I need to ask you something.

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

MARTIN

I meant to ask. A-After the fire, actually? But, well – there was the house and everything, and it just sort of –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) What is it? Martin.

MARTIN

Why didn't we go after the landlord guy? In the tenement.

ARCHIVIST

Arthur Nolan?

MARTIN

Yeah. He's still there, right?

ARCHIVIST

(bit of a sigh) After Jude, th,the fires – I,I didn't want to put you through anymore.

MARTIN

(sigh) Don't do that.

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

Don't use me as an excuse.

ARCHIVIST

I-I'm not. I just – *(inhale)* It didn't seem worth it. I didn't – *hate* him like I hated her. *(small exhale)* He never hurt me.

MARTIN

But all the people inside.

ARCHIVIST

Killing Nolan wouldn't have made it stop. It would just leave it – unsupervised.

[More gasping groans in the background. Martin *hmms*.]

[A sigh.]

MARTIN

John – we *are* doing good, right? Making things better?

[The slightest of pauses.]

ARCHIVIST

I don't know if that was ever an option.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

1. [Transcriber's Note: Not a real orchid genus, but spelling modeled after the closest genus I could find, *Fuertisiella*.

Following standard convention, the species name is not capitalized.] ↩

2. [Transcriber's Note: The genus for all roses is *Rosa*; therefore, this spelling comes from *gristle*, or cartilage, plus *-ium.*] ↩

3. [Transcriber's Note: Every tulip falls in the genus *Tulipa*. Spelling for this one just based phonetically.] ↩

4. [Transcriber's Note: All lilies are *Lilium*. Spelling phonetic.] ↩

MAG172 – Strung Out

Statement ########-12

[EXT. A WEB DOMAIN]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Footsteps.]

[There's a slight commotion in the background – sounds like the chattering of an audience.]

[Then a brush of fabric, and the footsteps stop. The bags jingle.]

ARCHIVIST

Ah, hold up. Uh, I, I need to, um…

MARTIN

Now? Seriously? We're almost out of here.

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

(kinda breathy) I'm sorry. Not really up to me.

MARTIN

Fine.

[He sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

If you're bored, you could always… take in a show.

MARTIN

That's – That's not funny, John.

ARCHIVIST

If you say so.

MARTIN

Just – Just give me a shout when you're done.

[As he speaks, we hear the fabric sounds of the bag and his moving away.]

ARCHIVIST

Good. Right. *(inhale)* Ticket for one, then, I suppose.

[In the background, some sort of announcer is speaking:]

ANNOUNCER (B.G.)

Ladies and gentlemen, the performance is about to begin. Please take your seats.

[The audience applauds.]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

(over applause) The Tragedy of Francis: A comic puppet show in all acts.

[The applause peters out.]

[NOTE: All "stage directions" and "dialog" shown in blockquotes below are "read" by the Archivist, as if he is holding a copy of a script. Francis, the Spider, and the play's other "characters" all speak only through his narration. Sound effects in brackets like this – including audience laughter and applause – are actual audible sound effects.]

Act Forty-Eight Thousand and Sixty-Seven:

> A stage that is a room that remains a stage. The audience watches, drooling, expectant.
>
> A table stands in the middle with a single chair. On that table can be seen a bottle, cigarettes, paraphernalia of all shapes, sizes, and

consumptions.

From the space above the stage hang the hooks. They shift, gently, without the breeze, –

[Creaks.]

– as eager and hungry as the patrons in the seats.

Enter FRANCIS, stage left. They walk slowly, unsteadily. Every limb is shaking.

FRANCIS, softly: “Please. Please god, not again. I don’t want it to happen again.”

[Laughter from the audience, bright and in our faces this time. It sounds almost canned, like you would hear on a sitcom.]

Pause for laughter.

THE SPIDER, offstage: “Then walk away, Francis, just turn and leave. All that is required is a little bit of willpower.”

[The creaking continues, seemingly depicting something, though it’s not quite clear what yet.]

“You have a little bit of willpower, don’t you?”

FRANCIS begins to cry. They turn back towards the

wings, keen to make their exit, but where they stood a moment before, there is now a dangling hook.

It lunges at FRANCIS, digging into their leg, pushing through the flesh of their thigh. There is a thin trickle of blood.

There is a thick shot of pain.

FRANCIS'S FATHER, offstage: "Useless piece of shit. You need to grow up!"

[That same audience laughter.]

Pause for laughter.

[The laughter grows louder this time, even culminating in a few claps. The audience really enjoyed that one.]

The hook lifts FRANCIS's leg off the ground. They hop painfully, trying to escape, but the thread pulls tight, dragging them towards the table.

THE SPIDER, offstage: "What a funny little dance, Francis. Such a funny dance."

FRANCIS simply screams in response. It is a scream of anger as much as it is of pain, and it cannot hide the dreadful inevitability they feel. The dull terror

that this act will end like all the others.

In their thrashing jig they stumble into another hanging hook.

[We hear said hook hit Francis's flesh with a *thwip!*]

[From now on, whenever the hooks are directed to do something in the play, we hear them do it as well.]

It burrows into their wrist with a noise of triumph.

FRANCIS'S MOTHER, offstage: "I just worry about you, dear; that's all. We want what's best for you, even if you can't see it. I'm sure you'll grow out of it."

Between the two silk strings, FRANCIS dangles, eyes darting wildly about.

FRANCIS: "Why are you doing this?"

THE SPIDER's giggle echoes around the stage.

[Audience laughter.]

Pause for laughter.

THE SPIDER twists the string, alternating which of the two lines is taut, causing FRANCIS to whirl and

pivot towards the table.

Its bulbous, distended abdomen can now begin to be seen protruding from above the curtains that fringe the stage.

FRANCIS goes limp, briefly allowing THE SPIDER to guide their movements smoothly.

THE SPIDER: “Good, Francis. Good.”

Without warning, FRANCIS kicks their free leg against the table. It does not move. It is part of the tableau.

The force of the motion sends them staggering backwards; another hook brushes their cheek and takes its chance, ripping through the corner of their mouth and pulling it up into a grimace.

RYAN, a friend, offstage: “You never smile when you’re clean, did you know that? I mean, what have you got to be so sad about? Honestly. You do make it hard sometimes. I don’t know.”

FRANCIS tries to respond, but the hook in their mouth pulls tight, and their lips curve upwards, distorting the words.

FRANCIS: “Shut *up!*”

[Audience laughter.]

Pause for laughter.

FRANCIS tries to use their free hand to pull the razored metal barb from their mouth, but THE SPIDER reaches down a leg and pulls, hoisting its victim up by their face.

The agonizing motion is too sudden to even give them time to scream, and their free leg kicks out, impotently into the air. It hits against another hook, which penetrates their worn and weary boots with ease, digging up through the sole and out through the back of the ankle.

CHRISTIE, a lover, offstage: “Come on…! Helps me get in the mood, you know? Just a nice thing to do together. Makes me feel close to you.”

As it lowers them back to the ground, FRANCIS tries again to curse at THE SPIDER. To tell it it has no right to these voices, to leave all of them out of this.

But the pain of the hooks travels up and down their veins in thin lines of needling torment and robs them of their voice.

THE SPIDER leans closer. Its grinning face and

quivering mandibles can now be seen; its abdomen throbs with anticipation.

THE SPIDER: “Oh, but I did not bring them. I did not write their lines in your little farce. *You* are the one that brought them. *You* devised the steps of this dance; I am simply here to… help you through them, when you forget.” *(beat)* “Oh, watch out!”

THE SPIDER pulls abruptly on the threads hooked into FRANCIS’s legs, and they tumble forward, faceplanting in a nasty-looking pratfall.

[Audience laughter.]

Pause for laughter.

FRANCIS’s free hand hits at the wooden floor of the stage weakly. It is unclear whether they hope to achieve something or if it is just an expression of despair.

The hook in their cheek pulls tight enough to form a grim smile of sorts.

FRANCIS: “What do you want?”

THE SPIDER: “The same thing I always want, Francis, every time we do this dance, every single act of our – hilarious production. I want what you

want, deep, deep down in the hidden bit of you you've tried so hard to kill. *You can't wait for the dance to conclude.*"

FRANCIS: "I don't want that anymore. It's different now; *I'm* different now. I've worked *so hard.*"

THE SPIDER: "I don't *care.*"

The strings all go taut at once, yanking the weakly protesting Francis to their feet.

[The sweet strains of a music box kick in.]

They are dragged, back and forth and around in a series of clumsy motions that, in another time, in another place, might have been a waltz.

But a waltz has a partner. FRANCIS only has a desire, an itch in their bones that flows into them, drip by oily drip, down the glistening strands that suspend them, guide them, hold them. A desire which injects itself through razor-sharp hooks and pools inside their stomach.

They don't *want* to want it, but…

[Audience laughter.]

Pause for laughter.

[The music box music ends.]

THE SPIDER: “A *fine* dance, Francis; that last measure I barely plucked the strings. Now come. Sit down. It’s time for a break. I know how much you’ve been looking forward to it.”

[A creaking twist of the hooks.]

THE SPIDER is almost fully descended now; its bulk eclipses everything above FRANCIS’s head and it swells with joy and amusement.

FRANCIS: “Please. Let me go. Just let me go.”

THE SPIDER: “Oh, Francis. It’s such a shame that I couldn’t do such a thing even if I wanted to. The man in the audience saw to *that. (laugh)* I am no more free than you are, little puppet. Ah! If only you could see the strings that bind *me*, that wind together as they pull me along my own path. Perhaps then you would not blame me so. But *they* are not the tripping threads we are here to watch, no. So sit, Francis. It’s time.”

Another tug of the hooks stretches the skin as FRANCIS staggers towards the table.

The blood flows faster, so dark it is almost black.

Their chest rises and falls rapidly as they are lowered into the only seat, the dusty air of the theater scratching their throat and drying their mouth. There is the taste of tin, growing stronger.

The hits are all arranged before them, spread across the table in a cornucopia of promised oblivions, releases, and delights. FRANCIS feels the hooks tighten as they look upon the offering.

That deepest want bubbles up to the surface, but at its core there is still that mute fear, that anticipation of what surrender will bring.

There is no escape to be found here, no respite from the charade that is now found to be the sum of FRANCIS's existence. By now, FRANCIS knows with utter clarity what falling to the call will bring, the awful crawling fate that they *will* endure before the next act eventually begins.

The syringe vibrates, almost imperceptibly, as the dark mass of legs and tiny, glittering eyes that sit within it shifts in anticipation. The cork of the bottle moves ever so slightly proud of the top, pushed by the unfurling thing inside. The cigarette scuttles closer, inch by impatient inch. Their longing is awful. And mutual.

Pause.

FRANCIS: “I don’t want it. Any of it.”

THE SPIDER does not reply.

Staring over the table, a memory now tugs at FRANCIS, the faintest residue of an earlier time, when the things before them would have brought a genuine joy to their heart and even a temporary peace. A time when the hunger was sharp and real, not this dull, unending ache that does nothing but propel them towards one grotesque act of consumption after another, but –

For all their keen awareness of what it might mean to do so, FRANCIS cannot deny the want THE SPIDER has gifted them.

They resist. They sit oh-so-very still and keep their hands held tight to their chest.

FRANCIS: “No. Not this time. I won’t.”

[Audience laughter.]

Pause for laughter.

FRANCIS looks up at THE SPIDER, so close now the thick drippings of its jaws fall onto their shoulders

in a sticky stream. It says nothing, but a hook leaps from the darkness backstage, fastening itself into the soft skin at the back of FRANCIS's free hand.

FRANCIS, offstage: "You don't get it, like – it's my decision. I know what I'm doing; just – can we stop talking about it, please? It's fine, i-it just. Helps. It helps."

FRANCIS's whole body shudders at the sound of their own voice, as the hook pulls their arm forward, across the table.

FRANCIS: "No. No!"

Their hand closes on the bottle, which shifts and chitters with delight as FRANCIS, shaking, brings it close.

THE SPIDER's legs twitch and jerk as it shifts the doomed marionette's strings. FRANCIS watches as their hand gently uncorks the bottle, and the first of the tiny crawling spiders begins to emerge – just as their mouth is yanked open by its hook and their arm upends the bottle.

As FRANCIS feels the cascade crawl down their tongue and over their throat, they wonder just for a moment, whether this is better or worse than when they scuttle up into their veins, or down into their

lungs.

It is an impossible question, and quite, quite pointless.

Above them, their tormentor cries out in exaltation as its abdomen ruptures, and the spiders within are joined by a rain of countless, tiny legs from above, covering them, embracing them. Drowning them.

There is no unconsciousness here, no calm detachment or serene buzz. There is only – the arachnids. Biting. Scurrying. Consuming.

And so it will be until the curtain descends at last and THE SPIDER resets the scene, its belly already beginning to swell once again with replacements for the creatures it so gorily birthed.

[Audience laughter.]

Pause for laughter.

[The audience begins to applaud, with real energy this time – this is performance-ending applause, final encore applause, though still definitely in the range of 'polite' and not raucous.]

And so the curtain descends.

[The audience continues applauding. Some members are cheering.]

The Tragedy of Francis: A comic puppet show in all acts.

[The audience quiets. Static begins to kick in.]

Act Forty-Eight Thousand and Sixty-Eight –

[There's a sort of voice in the background. It sounds kind of like:]

MARTIN (B.G.)

*(**very** faded, almost underwater)* John?

– A stage that is a room that remains a stage.

MARTIN (B.G.)

One is enough.

[But the Archivist keeps going.]

– The audience –

[Martin slaps him.]

ARCHIVIST

(wh?) I – Oh – Wh, What?

MARTIN

(breathing heavy) Sorry. You were starting another, and I didn't want to wait. We should get going.

ARCHIVIST

You – You were listening, I – I, I, I *thought* that –

MARTIN

No, I – Not for most of it. I just thought I heard – something. Whatever. I went exploring, alright? I don't know why; I shouldn't have.

ARCHIVIST

No, y,you *shouldn't* have!

MARTIN

You know how many stages there are in this place, how many – little theatres?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Yes I do.

MARTIN

Right, stupid question.

ARCHIVIST

Martin…

MARTIN

Well, let's just say they have a full bill, alright?

[In the background, an announcer repeats the show-starting announcement from earlier.]

ARCHIVIST

Martin.

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

Why did you go looking?

MARTIN

(fast) Can we just go, please?

ARCHIVIST

Of course. But… you were safe here. And after everything that's already happened, I – I, I just don't understand *why* you would…

MARTIN

(sudden burst) Me neither, okay!

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

(emotional) I mean, that's it, isn't it? I don't *know!* I don't know why I went exploring.

ARCHIVIST

(carefully) Are you saying you were… compelled?

MARTIN

I'm saying I don't *know*, do I? *(slight movement)* I thought I was just curious; it felt like curiosity, but – given where we are, and with the Web everywhere, and Annabelle Cane still out there playing *mind games* with *payphones*, I just – *(slight exhale)* I mean, how d'you even know if it's *your* motivation, you know? Being here – *(sigh)* I-It just makes me second-guess all of it, and I – I don't like it, it – *really* scares me.

ARCHIVIST

I, uh…

MARTIN

Oh, don't say that's what it wants; I *know*.

ARCHIVIST

I – I wasn't going to.

[Beat.]

[In the background, the announcer starts up again.]

MARTIN

Okay. Right.

ARCHIVIST

I was going to suggest that I could… maybe… Know. I could look. Just a quick peek, to, to see if it was just curiosity or – something else. *(beat)* Well?

MARTIN

I don't –

[He breaks off, tries again:]

MARTIN

If you look, and I was – *influenced*, then how can I trust anything else? How can I believe any of my thoughts and feelings are really mine?

ARCHIVIST

(struggles a bit) Uh – Well – I, I'll still be here to check. I'm not leaving you.

MARTIN

Sure, but you'd be looking through the details of *everything* that *ever* crosses my mind? I don't *want* that – y,you *know* I don't want that.

ARCHIVIST

I know.

[Pause. Some clothing sounds, movement.]

ARCHIVIST

Don't do this to yourself, Martin. This *is* what it wants, the, the paranoia. *(inhale)* Trust me, I, I know.

MARTIN

Fair.

[A silence.]

MARTIN

(exhale) John, what does the Web want? It's – I mean, we *know* it's got a plan; can't you just – see what it is?

[The Archivist sighs the sigh of someone who's got to try and

explain something to which they already *know* the answer's not satisfactory.]

ARCHIVIST

Knowing… Seeing… i,it's not the same thing as… understanding. Every time I try to know what the Web's plan is, if it can even be called a plan, I see a hundred thousand events and causes and links, an impossibly intricate – *(announcer starts up again)* – pattern of consequences and subtle nudges, but I, I can't – I can't hold them all in my head at the same time.

There's no way to see the whole, the, the point of it all. I can see all the details, but it doesn't – provide – *context* or – *(small sigh)* Intention.

I suppose the Web doesn't work in Knowledge, not in the same way.

MARTIN

Oh. Right.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry.

[Movement.]

MARTIN

And Annabelle?

ARCHIVIST

Still can't see her. If it wasn't for the phone call – *(sigh)* – I'd have said she was probably already dead.

MARTIN

(sigh) Yeah.

[Beat.]

ARCHIVIST

So… *(inhale)* Do you want me to? To tell you, if…?

MARTIN

No. *(small sigh)* No, I'll just have to live with it, I guess. Hardly the worst thing I'll have gone through since – *(cutting himself off)* I – um. It's fine.

[Heavy exhale.]

ARCHIVIST

Would you like to leave now?

[A bit of the bags jingle.]

[The audience laughter surges in the background.]

MARTIN

(…decisive) Yeah, screw this place. Never liked the theatre anyway.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG173 – Night Night

Statement ########-13

[EXT. A seemingly normal suburb… with no working streetlights]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Light footsteps, along with jangling of the bags.]

MARTIN

Slow down, I can barely see a thing!

ARCHIVIST

Sorry.

[A bird-call-like sound in the background. It repeats as Martin speaks.]

MARTIN

(surprisingly chipper) No prizes for guessing who's in charge here, eh?

ARCHIVIST

Mm, I – I suppose not.

MARTIN

You know, I really miss the days when I could blame broken streetlights on the council.

A strongly-worded letter just doesn't feel as forceful when it's addressed to *(funny voice, pitched lower) whichever Dread Power it may concern.*

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

Mm.

MARTIN

John?

ARCHIVIST

(zoned out) Hm?

MARTIN

(concerned) John, are you alright?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, I – I –

MARTIN

(overlapping) I mean, like, comparatively.

[Slight pause. A different bird screeches in the background.]

ARCHIVIST

(not fine) I'm fine.

MARTIN

Nope. Try again!

ARCHIVIST

Look, I would just *really* like to get through here as quickly as possible.

MARTIN

How come? This one seems like the quietest place we've been in a while – it's just rows and rows of quiet houses. I mean, I know *some* people don't like that sort of thing, but – *(slight laugh)* – I'm actually finding it kind of relax–

[The Archivist stops walking, his bag(s) jangling to a stop.]

ARCHIVIST

(cutting him off) Martin. *Please.*

[All of a sudden, it's apparent he's breathing heavily.]

MARTIN

…*John?* Where are we?

ARCHIVIST

I-It's complicated.

MARTIN

That's – not an answer!

ARCHIVIST

Can we *please* just move on?

[In the distance, there is a long, shrill scream. It sounds like it's coming from a little girl.]

MARTIN

John, where have you brought us?

[Pause.]

[Then the Archivist shifts.]

ARCHIVIST

What do you think happened to all the children when the world changed? Or were you not thinking about it?

MARTIN

(softly) No…

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Because they didn't just vanish. Childish fears are… simplistic. Direct.

[As he's speaking, Martin reacts and sighs to his words.]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

The Eye prefers the more complex neuroses and disquiets of a fully developed mind. So the children are allowed to age – and they are placed into domains where their fears can… mature.

[Martin exhales.]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Domains like this one.

MARTIN

Christ, that's – that's messed up!

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

[Beat.]

MARTIN

We've got to help them.

ARCHIVIST

How?

MARTIN

(getting agitated) I – I don't know! I'm not the one who's supposed to know everything, alright? There has to be *something* we can do!

[Another blood-curdling scream in the background.]

MARTIN

What's happening to them?

ARCHIVIST

Do you really want to know that? *Really?* I've been trying very hard to keep this one bottled up.

[Martin sighs as he speaks.]

MARTIN

Wh, What about the Avatar? *(gaining steam)* I know you said it didn't change anything, th-the domain would still exist, but at this point I don't care, alright? Anyone who's *chosen* to spend their apocalypse tormenting *children* – God, you need to *end* them. **Now.**

ARCHIVIST

It's not that simple.

MARTIN

Seriously? *Seriously?*

[The Archivist lets out a heavy, belaboured sigh.]

ARCHIVIST

Fine.

[The bags jingle as he starts walking.]

MARTIN

Okay, good.

[They keep walking.]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Where are we going?

[The Archivist doesn't answer.]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

John?

[The Archivist is too busy ringing a doorbell.]

[The background noises of screeching things hang in the silence for a pause.]

[Then:]

MARTIN

John, wait – are you, are you sure? –

[The door opens.]

CALLUM BRODIE

Yeah? What is it?

[This is clearly a child. His voice has a tinge of *what do you want* to it, like he owns the place and doesn't particularly like you.]

ARCHIVIST

Callum Brodie.

CALLUM

(hmph) Yeah?

MARTIN

Wait, is this – ?

ARCHIVIST

Are your parents home?

CALLUM

Dad's dead. Mum's here, but she lost it a while back. So now it's just me.

ARCHIVIST

Do you know who I am?

CALLUM

…You're the Eye guy, right?

ARCHIVIST

That's right.

CALLUM

So you're like, real important.

ARCHIVIST

(amused exhale) I suppose I am.

CALLUM

(unimpressed) Okay. So. *What do you want?*

MARTIN

John, can I have a word?

ARCHIVIST

Sure. Excuse me, Callum.

[Movement as he and Martin step aside to talk.]

MARTIN

(not really a question) That's the Avatar for this place?

ARCHIVIST

Callum Brodie. Thirteen years old. He guides the children through their fears of the Dark.

MARTIN

This is that kid Basira went after last year, right? The one the darkness cult took. So, So that's not even a kid, that's whatever was *inside* Maxwell Rayner; it's just wearing his body!

[The Archivist inhales.]

ARCHIVIST

(calling) Callum!

[Footsteps – either the Archivist towards Callum or Callum towards the Archivist.]

CALLUM

Yeah? What?

ARCHIVIST

You remember when those people kidnapped you? What happened?

CALLUM

(nonchalant) Mm – It was fine; I just hid and the cops came and got me.

ARCHIVIST

Tell the truth.

[His static rises. Callum makes a sound of – not exactly pain, but discomfort, whether physical or at the thought of having to be truthful.]

CALLUM

I-I-I was, I was scared, alright? I was really, really scared.

[The static fades.]

CALLUM (CONT'D)

And it was d-dark, and I couldn't see anyone, and – I didn't know where I was, and – and there, there was something on my face and – it was cold, and it was slimy. And it didn't like me.

Then there was a bang, and it was gone. And – the police were there.

ARCHIVIST

And what happened to the thing that tried to take you over?

CALLUM

Don't know, it – went away.

ARCHIVIST

It died in the light.

CALLUM

Whatever.

ARCHIVIST

And it was after that you started shoving smaller kids into

cupboards, right?

CALLUM

Yeah, give *them* a taste of it. Make *them* afraid of the dark.

[It's funny – when he says these last statements, it almost sounds like there's the slightest of echoes, like his voice is layered. It gives a buzz to his words.]

ARCHIVIST

But you've always pushed around smaller children, haven't you?

CALLUM

They make me feel sick. I *hate* them.

ARCHIVIST

And now?

CALLUM

Now everyone's afraid of me.

[Pause.]

ARCHIVIST

Martin?

MARTIN

Fine, you've made your point.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you, Callum.

CALLUM

(disgusted sigh) Whatever.

ARCHIVIST

Isn't it past your bedtime?

[Callum scoffs, and starts to close the door.]

CALLUM

I don't have a bedtime anymore.

[He shuts the door.]

[Martin and the Archivist start walking.]

ARCHIVIST

You see?

[Martin, however, is still frustrated.]

MARTIN

See what, John; what am I supposed to see? That you don't want to kill a – thirteen year old kid? Big revelation.

ARCHIVIST

I don't know what you want me to do.

MARTIN

I want you to *use your power.* I want you to help them; I want you to make things better!

ARCHIVIST

There is no *better* anymore.

MARTIN

(increasing in volume, emotion) You keep – saying that, and I *hate* it!

ARCHIVIST

(also giving in to the argument) I keep saying it because it keeps being **true**; you *know* that!

MARTIN

What I *know*, is that leaving children here is – *(struggles for words)* i-it's inexcusable; it's *monstrous!*

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping, firm) Martin. Tell me what you want me to do, and I will do it!

[Silence, but for the screams in the background.]

[Then:]

MARTIN

Tell me about this place. I need to know.

ARCHIVIST

I thought you hated listening. *(inhale)* Are you… sure that's what you want?

MARTIN

Of course it's not.

[A jangle as he sets his bag down.]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

But I need to hear it.

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

[An exhale. Static rising. And:]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

See Jack. See Jack run. Run, Jack. Run into the dark.

Don't see Jack anymore.

Jack doesn't want to be in the dark. Everyone knows there are monsters in the dark. Horrible monsters, with sharp teeth and red eyes and big nasty claws, that eat up little children who don't run fast enough.

So why does Jack run into the dark? Is it because a grown-up told him to? No. Now that it's dark, the grown-ups are asleep. They are snoring in their beds and will not wake up no matter how much Jack shouts.

Some grown-ups are not in bed, but they do not want to help Jack. They want to be alone. They don't want any children around at all. They tell Jack it is after his bedtime, and put him in another dark room where he cannot run.

So no grown-ups told Jack to run into the dark.

Is it because he is brave enough to fight the monsters? No. Jack is scared all the time. The world is so big and the night is so long, and the monsters are waiting under the bed and in the closet and down the hallway and in the street and round the corner and *behind him*.

They cannot *wait* to eat him.

He wants to be somewhere the monsters can't get him.

Jack is not brave. So why does Jack run into the dark?

Because everywhere is dark on Night Street. And if he doesn't run, then the monsters will get him.

Jack has never seen a monster – of course he hasn't; it's too dark – but he is sure that they are there. See that shadow, behind the swings? It is twisty and twirly, and if he doesn't jump over it, Jack is sure that it would cut off his feet and eat them.

See that tree, the one in the back garden? If Jack got too close, he is sure the bark will open like a big mouth and splinter teeth will bite off his hands to wear like apples.

You see that drum, the one from the old drying machine? There's a big worm that lives underneath it, and Jack is sure that if he disturbs it, it will wrap around him like a big slimy snake and squeeze him until his eyes pop out.

So Jack keeps running. He keeps running through the dark. He runs through his big, dark house. He runs through his big, dark garden. He runs down the big, dark street that just goes round and round and round.

He runs until he sees another child. It's Callum, from number 27. He's big and brave and isn't scared of monsters, though he knows ever so much about them. He smiles when he sees Jack. He is Jack's friend.

For just a minute, Jack stops running. Callum smiles and says he's

found a brand new monster.

Jack doesn't want to hear about it. He knows that when Callum tells him what it is, then it will start to chase him. He won't see it, of course, because it is just too dark. But he will know it's there.

Jack can't tell Callum to be quiet, though. Last time he did that, Callum put him in a hole for a very long time, and the next hole would certainly be full of all of Callum's nastiest monsters.

And anyway, Callum is Jack's friend. And friends don't tell each other to be quiet.

So Callum begins to tell Jack about a new monster. It lives down the drain and pops up through the plughole when you're washing your hands and bites off all your fingers one by one. The only way to stop it is to shine a torch down the hole.

But there are no torches on Night Street. There are no lights at all. No way to check a drain or a shadow or a tree. Only monsters. And the dark.

So Jack begins to run.

See Kaitlyn. See Kaitlyn hide. See Kaitlyn hide in the dark, because everywhere is dark on Night Street.

This time, Kaitlyn is in her wardrobe. The door is closed all but a crack so she can see into her bedroom. But the night light is out, and the room is pitch black, and she can hear the monsters moving about.

They are looking for her. They snuffle and grunt and growl. They knock over her lamp and gut her cuddly toys and talk to each other of whether they want to cook Kaitlyn into a stew or barbecue her arms and legs.

Kaitlyn buries her face in her mother's old fur coat and she cries and she cries. Her mother is downstairs, but she is part of the sofa now. She won't stop staring at the television and laughing. Laughing and laughing.

She doesn't like it when Kaitlyn is awake. She doesn't hear it if she screams.

The monsters are getting closer. They have looked for her under the bed. They have looked through her chest of drawers. They have climbed up all the bookshelves, and now they are moving towards the wardrobe.

She cannot see them, but their voices are sharp and mean and they come closer and closer and Kaitlyn is ever-so-scared.

Kaitlyn read a picture book once, full of horrible spiky fish with big eyes and crooked teeth. She would see them every time she went to bed for weeks.

That was what the monsters looked like, she was sure of it. They would grip her with their nasty cold fins and bite her head clean off.

Kaitlyn could not hide for long. It was very dark. But their big eyes

would see her in no time.

She was curled up in the corner of the wardrobe against a huge pile of scarves.

Wait. There's someone behind the pile! Kaitlyn can barely see, but it looks like – Callum Brodie! What is *he* doing in her wardrobe?

Kaitlyn doesn't like Callum Brodie. He punches her in the arm sometimes and calls her a baby, and he's always told her the monsters were going to get her. He was a bully.

"Go away, Callum Brodie," Kaitlyn says. *"I'm trying to hide."*

Callum Brodie just smiles a big grin full of crooked teeth.

"She's in here!" Callum Brodie shouts, loud enough for the whole street to hear. Kaitlyn can hear the monsters coming towards the wardrobe. She pushes Callum Brodie back and opens the door.

It is so dark outside that she can't see anything at all, but she runs and she runs and she runs, looking for another place to hide.

See Kaitlyn hide.

[Something creaks in the background – not the typical wooden creak, but like a door that won't close properly squeaking in the wind.]

[Static rushes in, then fades.]

[When the Archivist speaks, it's got a snap to it.]

ARCHIVIST

Is that enough for you? Do you need to hear more?

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

See Luka. See Luka sleep –

MARTIN

(cutting in) No, no, no; that's enough!

[A jangling as he – reaches over?]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

That's enough.

[Pause.]

[A few steps.]

[Then, clothing sounds as the Archivist speaks:]

ARCHIVIST

Thank you for not hitting me this time.

[A pause that stretches on for the span of three heavy

breaths.]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Was that what you wanted? What you needed?

[Beat.]

MARTIN

No, it didn't help at all.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry.

[Another pause.]

MARTIN

Let's get out of here.

ARCHIVIST

If you're sure.

MARTIN

The sooner we get back to the Archives, the sooner we can put a stop to this. *All* of this. They just – *(inhale)* They'll just need to hang on a little longer.

ARCHIVIST

Right. *(exhale)* Right.

MARTIN

Come on.

[They start walking.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG174 - The Great Beast

Statement ########-14

[EXT. VAST DOMAIN]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[There is a great howling in the background. A great gale of wind, shrieking its way towards us, punctuated every now and then with a thunderous boom. It's still distant. For now.]

[The Archivist's static fades quickly in, and:]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

The shadow falls over everything Mehreen has ever known.

When it had first covered her home, bathing the street beyond the window in unexpected shade, she had thought it an eclipse. There wasn't supposed to be one then, she is sure of that, although, if pressed, she could not have told you what day it is today.

Before the shadow fell, she is sure that the sun was shining brightly, although, if pressed, she could not have pictured it.

And the humid heat of a lingering summer had left the world sleepy and unprepared, although, if pressed, she remembers the heat but

not the season.

All told, the time before the sky was covered is hazy to her, but she knows there was one: A time before something blocked out the Sun.

It moves in shifts as if it is willed, clearly some part of a greater whole. A foot? A hand? Perhaps a single finger. To look up is to see only the smallest fraction of it covering the sky, and half of Mehreen's mind screams at her to get back, to get further away, to get to a distance where perhaps she could see the whole of it. A position where the idea of comprehending what she is looking at isn't some – bitter joke.

But the other half of her mind whispers the truth: That it is already so far away that to see it in its entirety is impossible. And if she did, she could not understand it.

[A boom, slightly closer than before. They're beginning to take on a science-fiction-esque air; there's a bit of synth or scattering in the boom, now.]

But there is another certainty within her, another piece of terrible knowledge that bubbles up unbidden from somewhere in Mehreen's soul that is no longer hers: It is coming closer.

It is descending on her home and everything that she has ever known. And when it arrives, it will not even notice that it has destroyed her. That it has so casually wiped from the world everything that she will ever know or love.

It will crush her home. It will crush her family and her city and her world. The shadow is over everything.

Mehreen gathers her mother, who sits in the kitchen over a pot of sour-smelling tea, berating her that they should have left earlier. She gathers her husband, who snorts in derision and tells her that he's heard that there isn't really any danger at all. She gathers her daughter, who asks with wide eyes and the voice of nervous innocence where they are going. *What's going on?*

Mehreen cannot quite make out their faces as she bundles them into the car, old and shuddering as it coughs into life. Does she remember having a child? A spouse? Does she remember her mother having such a cruel sneer?

It doesn't matter. They are here now, and she *has* to save them. She cannot leave them to the growing shadow and the thing coming ever-closer.

[Boom.]

She starts to drive. The streets are empty, the blank-faced strangers around them frozen, staring into the sky in still and silent expectation.

There is no traffic, nothing to stop the laboured grinding of the elderly car as it careens down the street, hunting desperately for the edge of the shadow.

Mehreen knows if she can just escape it, find where it ends and the sunlight hits the earth, they can be free. They will not be beneath it when the vast being arrives.

But there is no hope in her for it, no glimmer of optimism as they hurtle down street after street. Only the crushing dread, the leaden knowledge that they started too late, that they're not fast enough, that the shadow reaches a thousand miles in every direction, and they could drive for a *month*.

Have they been driving that long? How many miles have they traveled now? And still they would never get away, never cross that line from below the shadow into open, sunlit air.

[Boom.]

The world gets darker, and the thing moves closer. It will be upon them any moment now. The car grinds and crunches somewhere in its engine and rolls to a stop.

Mehreen grabs her daughter, now crying with fear and confusion, and begins to run.

Where is she running to? It will be upon them all soon, wiping out everything they were or are or will be, rendering their lives an unremembered blip, crushed beneath its unstoppable significance.

It is right above them, and it will. Not. Stop.

How long has she been running? Minutes? Days? Her unfamiliar

daughter laughs cruelly, carried in Mehreen's exhausted arms. They cannot escape the shadow as their doom gets forever closer.

Far, infinitely far above her, Edward holds his grip tight. His fingers are white with strain, and his own arms burn and ache deeper than he thought possible.

He is interlocked, woven into an unending tapestry of suffering, contorted bodies. The shape that they create is a mystery to him, but as it moves he can feel his own muscles twist and stretch with those he holds onto, together shifting and pulling and lifting the bulk of the thing of which he is only the tiniest part.

Where the impulses come from, he does not know, traveling through the impossible colossus, rippling down through the people that form its bulk. Moving as one.

He does not know where in the thing he is, but suspects that it is not too far from the edge, for sometimes he can see something he might almost believe to be sky.

Some part of it hits the ground, –

[Boom. Much closer than before.]

– however distantly below him that may be.

[The wind is shrieking up here – we are in the midst of it, as compared to Mehreen.]

A foot, perhaps, or a limb of some sort.

[And it is at this point that it becomes clear that those booms we're hearing? They're this great beast's "footsteps."]

The shuddering impact of it resonates up through the bodies that surround him, and all at once they cry out in pain. He can hear bones snap and tendons rip as the force of the step sharply shifts the twisted arrangement of human misery.

Edward's own neck is spun, pushed by the shoulder of the woman crushed in behind him, and turned so far to the side that he is sure another millimeter – and it would break entirely.

For hours he holds that position, dreading every moment that the next motion of the thing they construct will break him like thin porcelain.

And then it comes: Not another stepping impact, for those are rare and ponderous, but the agonized pull of the whole trying to lift itself. Every muscle in every body tenses all at once, and Edward finds himself moving, pushed and squeezed and gasping for space and – free.

Without warning, he finds himself in open air, forced out of the thing like a shoot pushing up through the soil. He takes in a deep breath, his protesting limbs now limp and almost useless, and collapses upon a ground that looks up at him in envy.

No. Not a ground. For it is only now that Edward realizes how thin the air is, how cold it is without the warmth of uncountable bodies on all sides.

Behind him he can see the shifting sea of people stretching out forever, but in front of him, a few hundred meters away, there is what appears to be… an edge.

In a place where time has meaning it might be said it takes Edward hours, days to drag himself over the writhing floor. But eventually he finds himself laying upon that horizon, willing himself to look out, over, and down, see where he is. If there is any place to which he might escape.

So finally, he looks.

[The howling begins to build up again, up into:]

[Boom.]

[The wind keeps whipping around as Edward looks.]

His stomach drops, and his arms seize as he looks upon a hundred miles of slowly-moving humanity down to a stark and barren ground far below. It is so far down that if he climbed for a year he would not reach the end of it.

His tears fall down and away into the open sky. His teeth lock in fear and he begins to try and move backwards, away from the

precipice.

But there is a movement. A shift in the people below him as the great beast stretches a part of itself.

A wave of spasming limbs passes beneath Edward, and in a moment he is flung, upwards and away, out into the empty air below.

He is falling. He cannot breathe as the air is forced from his lungs and the razor-cold wind lashes at his skin.

He is falling. The beast he was once a part of is a blur beside him as he plummets, human forms lost in the strange, moving texture.

He is falling, and he is so small and so afraid he wonders if he will ever hit the ground.

He does not want to die smeared over that flat and hateful wasteland far below, and he flails, limbs throwing themselves violently around, trying to catch a hold of something, *anything* to save himself.

Edward feels a hand grip his. The stop is sudden, violent, wrenching his shoulder from its socket with a wet *pop*. He screams in pain but also in relief as he hangs there, suspended above his fate.

Despite his dread, it takes only a moment for him to make his decision. He reaches out with his other arm and feels it gripped by another hand as slowly, inexorably, he allows himself to be pulled back into the great, suffering colossus.

Far below, there is another impact –

[Boom.]

[The wind howls. It almost sounds like crying.]

As if something were being stepped on.

[His static creeps back in, just enough to:]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[EXT. VAST DOMAIN]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[A sigh.]

MARTIN

Is it much further?

[The Archivist gives a little *heh* of an amused exhale, and there's a grin to his voice when he responds.]

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

[Martin sighs, a bit over-dramatically.]

ARCHIVIST

(still amused) I'm not entirely sure what you were expecting; it's the *Vast*. The clue is in the name.

MARTIN

(long-suffering) Yes, alright.

ARCHIVIST

Just be glad that this is one of the domains that actually has ground to walk on.

MARTIN

Whatever.

[Another boom-step.]

MARTIN

S-So how far are we from the other side? And – And don't say time and space don't work here; that's a cop-out and you know it.

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Three days.

MARTIN

(immediate) Thank you!

[A brief lull as they keep walking.]

[And then it hits:]

MARTIN

Wait. Wait, what counts as a day?

ARCHIVIST

*(audibly trying not to laugh *too* hard)* What an *excellent* question.

MARTIN

(under breath) Oh my god – *(to the Archivist)* You can be *infuriating* sometimes, you know that?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

Fine! Fine. How about Simon; how close are we to him?

ARCHIVIST

Um… Close, but he's able to move a lot faster than we are in this place.

MARTIN

Meaning…?

ARCHIVIST

Meaning I know where he is, but – if he doesn't want us to reach him, I don't know if we'll have much of a chance.

MARTIN

So – So, what, we're just going to trust him to show up to his own execution –

[He is cut off by the man of the hour himself falling from the sky in what sounds like right in front of them.]

[Both he and the Archivist give a short yell of surprise.]

MARTIN

Jesus!

[A short laugh, and:]

ARCHIVIST

(a bit in shock, in response to Martin's cut-off question) Uh… apparently!

SIMON FAIRCHILD

Hello!

[He makes a big show of brushing off the rubble or whatever else has gathered around him on impact.]

SIMON

Hello, dreadfully sorry!

[Just as before, he sounds like a stereotype – all proper and manners, in a delightfully overeager way. Somehow, though, it's not affected – there's definite mirth there, too.]

[He continues to brush off the debris, recovering his breath as he does so.]

SIMON

I only just noticed you were both here! That's the problem with having such a big place, you know – you can miss things if you're not careful.

ARCHIVIST

Uh-h. Right.

SIMON

Good to see you again, Martin! And you must be the famous Archivist. Herald of the Ceaseless Watcher, Harbinger of the New Age, etcetera. Lovely to meet you at last. *(exhale)* Simon Fairchild, at your service.

ARCHIVIST

I know who you are.

SIMON

(with a laugh) Of course you do. I imagine you know pretty much everything by this point. How is it? How does it *feel?*

ARCHIVIST

Strange.

SIMON

Yes. I can imagine! These gifts can feel very disconcerting at times. I'm sure you'll get used to it eventually.

And how are you, Martin? Still trying to save the world and all that?

MARTIN

Yes.

SIMON

Pity. Well, armageddon… *(like it's just occuring to him)* it's not for everyone, I suppose. I'm quite enjoying it, of course, although – Junior over there can be a little bit of a handful.

[In the background, "Junior" takes another step.]

MARTIN

(disgusted) I might have guessed you'd be happy living in this *nightmare*.

SIMON

I mean, not that it matters, but – yes I am! Honestly, I think you could be too, if you set your mind to it.

But I'm not one to tell *you* how to live your eternity.

MARTIN

No. You're *not*. Because I'm **done** listening to you!

SIMON

I'm sorry? I'm not sure I follow.

MARTIN

All those lies you told me – you *helped* to do this; you turned the world into your, your – *playground*.

SIMON

Um, not to be a pedant, but if you recall, I was actually doing a favor for *Peter*. And if Peter *had* won, none of this would have happened. Also, not to make excuses, but they weren't exactly lies. Just – oversimplifications of complicated truths.

And guesses. *(brief pause)* A lot of guesses. *(brief pause)* Almost all guesses, really, now I come to think about it.

MARTIN

Shut up! I don't care.

SIMON

Goodness! We're rather tetchy, aren't we?

ARCHIVIST

We've… *(slight laugh)* not been having an easy journey.

MARTIN

John.

ARCHIVIST

What, it's *true*; we haven't.

SIMON

Well, in that case, thank you for swinging by to my – huge corner of the apocalypse. We don't get many visitors these days, and, well – you might be the closest thing the universe has ever had to an

important person.

ARCHIVIST

Oh – I… um…

SIMON

I mean, *obviously* you're still ultimately finite and all that, but altering the very fabric of the universe, that's… *(*phew*)* That's pretty good going, all things considered.

MARTIN

(moving) That's enough. John?

ARCHIVIST

Uh… yes?

MARTIN

Do it.

[The wind picks up.]

[Another boom-step.]

SIMON

Uhh… Do what?

MARTIN

Kill him.

ARCHIVIST

Uh –

[The Archivist splutters, exhales.]

SIMON

Hang on. Can he do that?

MARTIN

(forceful) He can, and he's going to!

SIMON

Oh! *(processes)* Right! Seems a *bit* rude, to be honest.

ARCHIVIST

(background, simultaneous) Oh, oh… okay, um.

MARTIN

John?

ARCHIVIST

J-Just give me a moment! I, uh, I –

SIMON

(simultaneous) I-In fact, yes! You know what? I'll, I'll probably just be going, then – I, I – I'd prefer to keep existing, if it's all the same to you, uhm –

MARTIN

J-John!

ARCHIVIST

I –

SIMON

(fast) Been lovely chatting to you! Good to see you guys. Feel free to pop by again when you're feeling less, um, murdery.

MARTIN

(yelling) ***John!***

SIMON

Byeee!

[And with a *whoosh,* he's gone.]

[Silence.]

[Then the Archivist sighs.]

MARTIN

You let him go.

ARCHIVIST

(weary) Yeah.

MARTIN

Why?

ARCHIVIST

Because, uh… uh –

MARTIN

(cutting him off) Why did you let him go, John?

ARCHIVIST

(sharper) I don't know, I just – *(sigh, easing off)* I didn't want to kill him.

MARTIN

(strangely calm) Why not? Because he was *nice* to you? Because he was charming, because he was *fun?*

ARCHIVIST

No, I-I, I just –

[A creakity-creak: Helen's here! And with her is her signature

shimmery static.]

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

Not *now*, Helen!

HELEN

I just wanted to add my vote to the disappointed side.

MARTIN

Wait, really?

HELEN

I was rather looking forward to watching an old man metaphysically explode. Honestly, I feel a bit cheated. The others were *exceptional* fun.

[The Archivist sighs as she speaks.]

MARTIN

Wait, you were watching?

HELEN

Of course. As much fun as the new world is, I am not about to miss a real, honest-to-godless demigod murder spree!

[She laughs.]

[Martin sighs.]

MARTIN

Look, you're really not helping.

HELEN

(cheerful) I'm not trying to!

ARCHIVIST

Look, it's none of your business. *Either* of you.

MARTIN

Like *hell* it isn't.

ARCHIVIST

Martin.

MARTIN

Don't *"Martin"* me! Sure, he *looks* like a helpless old man, but –

ARCHIVIST

(cutting him off) I *know*, Martin; I know all the things he's done.

HELEN

Fantastic! So, rip him up! Pop him! Oh, oh, but, um, just give me a bit of a heads-up so I can find a good spot

MARTIN

Enough, Helen.

HELEN

I won't be in the way! He won't even know I'm there. Again.

MARTIN

What is it, John? What's *wrong?*

ARCHIVIST

I just – This whole… avenging angel thing, I, I'm not – *(exhale)* It doesn't feel right.

MARTIN

It seemed to feel right when we were avenging all the wrongs done against *you*.

ARCHIVIST

I know. *(stronger)* I, I, I know, alright? But well – *(exhale)* That's kind of the problem; I, I have all this – power, and, and I want to use it to try to help, but I – *(under breath)* I don't know – *(normal)* I mean, I *do*. *(getting emotional)* I-I've done so much damage, and – and anything that might help to balance that is – *(composing self)*

But killing other Avatars is, is not – I, I don't think it makes anything better. I think it just makes *me* worse.

MARTIN

You're *removing evil* from the world.

ARCHIVIST

I, I'm not though, am I? The tenement fire is still burning. The mortal garden is growing wild. The carousel –

HELEN

Oh!

[This effectively shuts the argument up.]

ARCHIVIST

What.

HELEN

How are we still having this *intensely* boring conversation? I honestly thought that actually ending the world would be enough to stop you whining, but no!

You're the most powerful person in a world where the worst consequences imaginable have already happened! Absolute power, with *zero* responsibility!!

What more can you *possibly* need to just enjoy yourself a tiny bit?

[Junior punctuates her words with another step.]

[The Archivist and Martin don't respond.]

HELEN

Fine! Guess I'll just leave then! Hang out inside myself until you get angry again and accidentally have some fun.

ARCHIVIST

It's *not. Fun.*

[Helen just laughs.]

HELEN

And here I thought you'd forgotten how to make jokes.

[Her door creaks as she leaves, then shuts.]

[The Archivist sighs.]

ARCHIVIST

I-I, I'm sorry, Martin. After meeting the child, I thought – I'd been – *(sudden burst)* I really hoped things would be simpler, you know? A nice straightforward apocalypse.

MARTIN

(also sighing) No, *(exhale)* I'm sorry. Cheerleading you when you're on a magical murder spree probably wasn't – a great idea.

ARCHIVIST

I started it.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

Good point! *(small laugh)* I'll keep my apology, then.

[Movement and fabric sounds – a hug? Holding each other?]

[A small, happy *hm* and exhale from Martin.]

MARTIN

I do kinda wish you'd wait until after Fairchild to have your crisis, though.

ARCHIVIST

You *really* want that old man dead.

MARTIN

I mean, su– yeah, *sure*, when you say it like that it sounds bad.

ARCHIVIST

What did he *do* to you?

MARTIN

…He threatened to throw me off a rollercoaster.

ARCHIVIST

(amused, knowing) Ah.

MARTIN

Okay, I, I know it *sounds* like a joke, but –

ARCHIVIST

(straight-faced) No, obviously, he's an avatar of the Vast, it's a scary threat coming from him.

MARTIN

(exactly! so There) Yeah!

ARCHIVIST

It just – doesn't – *sound* like a scary threat.

MARTIN

Thanks for that.

[Sudden movement.]

MARTIN

Hang on, you're still down to kill Elias, right? Uh – Jonah. Whatever.

ARCHIVIST

I'm still going to confront him. I don't know if it is something I'm even – capable of, but if I can and I have to, I will.

MARTIN

Yeah?

ARCHIVIST

Don't worry. I won't hesitate.

MARTIN

Right.

[The wind builds up again. Junior takes another step.]

MARTIN

(exhaling) Right, alright then. Good.

[He takes a step.]

MARTIN

Let’s go, then. We don’t want to keep him waiting.

ARCHIVIST

Lead on.

MARTIN

Uh – Wh, I –

ARCHIVIST

Oh, right, yes. Follow me, then.

[They start walking.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG175 – Epoch

Statement ########-15

[EXT. A DOMAIN OF THE EXTINCTION]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[There's a low, musical tone in the background. The constant movement of what sounds like metal or metal scraps, overlain with the buzzing of night insects.]

[Also in the background: a distant air raid siren. Multiple, actually, overlapping only at the edges, each setting off a higher pitch as the previous one ends.]

[A quick static in, and:]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Item: A stubborn lamp.

Approximately a foot and a half long, stand made of discoloured brass with a crude fleur-de-lis pattern and slightly melted at the base.

Shade constructed from satin, original colour impossible to discern due to assorted stains, likely blood, oil, and paraffin wax.

The bulb is imprinted with the words “Long Life” despite appearing to contain a standard tungsten filament. There is a long, thin crack that runs the length of the bulb, and it is remarkably easy to cut yourself on the thin glass.

With the vacuum compromised, it should be impossible for the light to turn on. The power cable is severed about three inches from the base of the stand and writhes like a beheaded snake.

There is nothing in this place to power it.

Despite all of this, a thin and sickly glow can be seen from underneath the lampshade, an irregular, pulsing light that casts rotten shadows on the piles of detritus and clusters of ash and bone that surround it.

Where its sputtering illumination falls, the color drains from everything, leaving nothing but a faded grey. It cannot survive, but still it clings to its existence, destroying everything around it.

It smells like death.

[Another light clattering of metal from the pile – is someone looking around?]

Leah’s fingers are worn and dry, their color painfully faded, save for a streak of scarlet that drip-drops from her cut fingers as she furiously scribbles her findings into the notebook. The pages tear with the frenzy of her writing as she desperately tries to keep her

thoughts alive.

[More clattering.]

Fauna: A mouldering seagull.

Larger than any related specimen to be found before the Anthropocene age, this bird has been rendered flightless by the tightly woven plastic netting that winds around and around its torso, digging into the skin beneath the feathers and bulging over the strange lumps and tumors that cover it.

Its feathers have turned an oily black, and its vestigial eyes are pale and sightless, relying instead on the sounds its prey makes as they traverse the noisy junkpiles of discarded landscape.

Its beak has become hard and its edges are serrated, allowing it to tear apart the tin cans and hard plastics that shield its food with ease.

Its legs are long and many-jointed, allowing it to move across the uneven ground, and its throat is blocked with concrete, preventing it from crying and letting it move among the ruins in complete silence.

It nests in the rusted-out hollows of fleeing cars, constructing intricate shelters for its young out of corpse-hair and wiring. Its eggs are rusty, covered in slime, and its chicks are born with plastic rings around their necks.

They smell like ammonia and salt, and their name is meaningless, as there is no longer such a thing as the sea.

[Clatter.]

Leah hides behind a cracked vending machine, waiting for the thing to pass. She knows it can hear the rapid scratch of her broken pencil, but it is all she can do to get it down, get it all down on paper – another futile warning of a future that is already here.

Item: A history book.

Hardback. Eight-point-five by eleven inches and approximately an inch and a half thick, although the number of pages is impossible to discern.

Its dust jacket has long since been lost, and what remains is wrinkled maroon cloth over soggy book-board.

The faded letters of a partial title can be seen embossed into the spine. The words *A Brief History of* – can be made out clearly, but the rest has been burned away.

The spine is cracked and broken, but the volume itself cannot be opened. The book has clearly been submerged into some sort of fat or binding agent, and the paper within it has fused together into a single, indistinguishable lump of pulp.

The wet mass within it retains sufficient moisture that if the covers are pressed upon, a thin rivulet of clear liquid will run like tears

down the book's cover.

If you do this, the book will scream.

[It is at this point you notice the cacophony in the background: a strange hissing, the wretched cries of their modern seagull, and another, more indistinguishable sound. Perhaps it is the book.]

It is a stupid thing, a long-dead trinket that was of no use to anyone even when it puffed itself up with the factuous intellectual dribblings of those who believed the past was any defense against the future, bloated as it was with the hagiographies of war criminals and smugly grinning murderers.

Now it serves as a suffering reminder of everything that has been lost – which is to say, nothing of value.

Leah hates the book. She cannot shake the feeling that once, long ago, she read it, seeing within its pages the stark importance of taking action, of trying to change the world for the better and avoiding the dead, nightmare future that kept her awake at night.

But it was doomed from the start, and those who salivated at the thought of a place in history had secured nothing but its end.

[More crumbling, more squeaking.]

Item: A laughable umbrella.

Look at it. What does it think it's doing here? Lying there, broken, skeletal. There hasn't been rain in fifty years. The soil is cracked and parched. Any vegetation that claws its agonized way up out of it maggot-white and dry as dust.

The only moisture is from the wet rot of the junkpiles that stretch thirty feet above the ground in all directions, spilling out into the sandy, sloping basin that was once a sea bed.

Stupid umbrella. Does it think there is a monsoon coming? Does it even remember what a cloud of water vapor looks like?

The clouds that pass now are oily and stink of sulfur, waiting for you to stop paying attention before they climb down your throat and settle in your lungs.

Perhaps this idiot apparatus thinks it can protect from the relentless heat of the sun, but its fabric is torn and ruined, hanging from the snapped metal limbs, desperate for a breeze to stir it from its – complete stillness.

Take a moment to sneer at this corpse of an umbrella, and wish for a moment you had water enough within you to *spit on it*.

Leah can barely tell what she's writing anymore. The catalog of horrors she's compiling, this report on everything for nobody, but what else is she to do? What else can even come close to quelling the fear that suffuses her existence?

Fauna: The thing that lives.

Something lives in the Anthropocene age. Not a twisted reflection of the world, not a parasite or a scavenger or a cockroach, but a native.

Something born in the sloping shells of sagging concrete towers, that tastes the tang of rusted iron in the air and knows that it is home.

Something that does not know or care what a human is, any more than mankind thought of the creatures that once lived in the shells they found on the beach.

It moves through the stacks of garbage like a beetle through filth, and its smile is all-too familiar, though its eyes are dark and empty.

It cannot be seen in its entirety, for it keeps itself covered, but its long, unfurling tongue may be seen emerging, pink and bristling with long, hairlike taste buds, hunting for something old enough to eat.

It whispers to itself in the dark, and sounds like old snippets of toothpaste commercials and adverts to join the army.

[A strange, low moaning sound – but layered as if through a filter, as if through one of those plastic microphones that layer your voice until your voice sounds alien and you're not quite sure how many of you there were to start with.]

It is hard to tell if there is more than one, but either there are

several of them of different sizes, or there is just the one, and it is getting bigger.

It is our replacement, and it is welcome to the world.

Even if Leah had known, if she had had time to warn them, who would have believed her? Who would not have laughed her out of her life if she described the horrors that were to come in their true and vivid detail?

[Another multiphonic groan. Is it getting closer?]

But there is no one left to warn, though that does not slow her hand even a moment. She ignores the burning pain in her forearm, where the thing's rough tongue has torn a section of her skin clean off.

[More groans, one after the other. Is there more than one? Are they calling out to each other?]

Item: A forgotten bone.

…*Whose* is this? Pale white and stained with thick black tar.

A human bone, that much is clear; too big to be a child's, at least. Can a bone seem familiar? The shape of it echoing through your mind, like a face seen only in dreams?

It may be followed up to a ribcage, still sticky in places with soapy cadaver fat, and closing around a crumpled beer can where the heart should be.

There's a skull as well, yellowing in the thick dust of the open air.

Strange. Everything here is either bone-dry from relentless heat, or damp through from decomposition and stagnant decay. Lifeless yet decaying. The world we have left behind.

Leah considers the bones for some time.

Does she know them? Are they hers? If she had been quicker, more forceful in her warnings, might they still be alive?

Her pencil is broken, but her notes, her warnings from this new world are far from complete.

She snaps off another rib and continues writing.

[Static increasing.]

[A soft sigh from the Archivist.]

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

[EXT. A DOMAIN OF THE EXTINCTION]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[Crunching of footsteps, with the occasional clatter of glass or metal from the junkpiles.]

MARTIN

You know what? I am sitting down.

ARCHIVIST

Are… you sure? That thing is… that's not in great shape.

MARTIN

(don't care! nothing matters!) Neither am I. I have been on my feet for a *literally* uncountable amount of time.

[A step, some groaning, the jangle of bags, and creaking of what is presumably a couch as Martin sits.]

ARCHIVIST

How is it?

MARTIN

Great! *(creak from the couch)* It's great. Lovely couch.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Well, rest up, I suppose!

MARTIN

It's two-seater!

ARCHIVIST

*(you are **not** getting me on that thing)* Yes it is!

[Brief pause, in which there is a slight amused exhale and another creak of the couch.]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Hard pass, thank you.

[An exhale, and shift from Martin, with some sloshing, followed by a lovely little moment of silence but for the gull sounds and sirens in the far background.]

MARTIN

What's it like?

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

This place's – *(inhale)* its statement.

ARCHIVIST

Not too surprising. It's a domain designed to eke fear out of those

afraid of a world – *(inhale)* – destroyed by human hands. It, uh – *(exhale)* It dwells on it.

[An understanding *hm* from Martin.]

[Another brief moment of silence, then:]

MARTIN

(creak as he shifts) So it was real then, the Extinction?

ARCHIVIST

Of course it was *real* – A-At least in the sense that – it was a thing people feared.

Whether it was strong enough in its own right to be considered at a level with Smirke's Fourteen, or – whether it was on its way to getting there, I – maybe. This sort of thing is always muddy.

MARTIN

So Peter was lying.

[The Archivist lets out his "it's not that simple" sigh.]

ARCHIVIST

To a degree. But – mostly he was just like anyone else who tried to take the scope of human terror and – *(small inhale)* package it

neatly into little theories. All this talk of Emergence and – birthing a new power – it's just people being scared.

[Creak as Martin shifts.]

MARTIN

What, so no one had any idea?

ARCHIVIST

Martin, I have the whole scope of human knowledge available to me, and – *(small inhale, sharp exhale)* I'd struggle to give you a simple answer to most of this stuff.

And even if I am omniscient, I'm starting to realize that… doesn't mean objective.

[Creak. Martin *hm*s.]

MARTIN

(sigh) I guess it's hard not to bring your own baggage to this sort of thing.

ARCHIVIST

I don't know if it could even *exist* without the baggage. You want to talk about psychological projection, try viewing the world through the lense of the being that is, by its very nature, a reflection of your

own obsessions and fears.

MARTIN

(sigh) Yeah, alright. I get it.

But what about the – real world, were they right?

ARCHIVIST

I – I'm not sure I follow.

MARTIN

M– Right, if none of this had happened, if the world had just – carried on? *(creak)* What would have happened? Was – Was all that fear justified?

ARCHIVIST

(exhale, moving closer) I can't know the future, Martin, not even a hypothetical one.

MARTIN

But – you know what was going on, what was happening. O-Out of everyone, you're the best place – *(squeak)* You, you, you've got the info to make a pretty *damn* educated guess!

[Brief pause.]

ARCHIVIST

I, I don't know what you want me to say, Martin. *Yes,* it was bad, worse than most people thought, and things were only going to deteriorate. But was the end of humanity actually imminent? I – probably not?

But we were well on the way, and – it would have been the end of an awful lot of things.

[Large creak.]

MARTIN

So you don't think it would have been the end of the world?

[There's a bit of a laugh to the end of his sentence.]

ARCHIVIST

The end of the world. Now there's a concept. Everything ends, I suppose. *(movement)* Even this place. Can't last forever. Eventually… it will die as well.

[Movement.]

MARTIN

You're starting to sound like Simon.

ARCHIVIST

No. He was always looking towards the infinite, but I'm not sure there is such a thing. If I try, I can – *(slight static)* – see the edges of reality, but – I can't hold its full scope in my mind.

[Static fades out.]

MARTIN

And beyond it?

ARCHIVIST

Beyond what? Reality?

MARTIN

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

I don't know. Maybe nothing.

[Beat.]

[Then Martin creaks the couch again.]

MARTIN

John.

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

D'you know if – like – gods, religion, the afterlife, all that stuff. Do you know if any of that was real?

ARCHIVIST

(exhale, a bit amused) Really rolling out the big questions today.

MARTIN

Sorry, it's just – this place just brings it out in me, I guess.

[Slight static kicks in again.]

ARCHIVIST

If there is a god, or gods, or an existence beyond this world, the Eye can't see it. It sees the fear of it, but – nothing of its truth.

[Static fades.]

MARTIN

…So… is that a no?…

ARCHIVIST

It's an 'I don't know,' although – *(heavy inhale)* People's faith – it hasn't saved them. Not here.

MARTIN

(soft) True.

ARCHIVIST

Why do you ask? Didn't think you were at all religious.

[Squeak.]

MARTIN

Oh, I'm not. Mum was, but – *(squeak)* I, I don't know. With everything going on, it – *(exhale)* certainly *feels* less far-fetched. Besides, at this point, I'd take any help we can get.

ARCHIVIST

I don't know how kindly any god would look upon what we've done.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

Thanks for that.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry.

[A shift and a creak.]

MARTIN

Let's get out of here. This place is making me a bit too… existential.

[He moves to get up, his clothing rustling and the bags squeaking and jangling.]

ARCHIVIST

Wait.

[Martin stops.]

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

(sigh) Where we're going, the, uh… *(finds it)* The next domain, I've been meaning to tell you, but it's – well.

MARTIN

Spit it out, John.

ARCHIVIST

Basira and Daisy. We're close.

MARTIN

Wait, what? Wait, *really*?! *(sudden energy)* B– Th-that's brilliant; what are we waiting for; let's go!

ARCHIVIST

I – uh – yeah, it's – it's not going to be easy; things aren't… good.

MARTIN

(fast, high-pitched – he's going to take the mick but he's excited) Oh my goodness, really? And here was me thinking the apocalypse was going oh, so *swimmingly!*

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Yes, alright, I just meant –

MARTIN

(cutting him off) I, I know what you meant! I can still be keen to see our friends!

[He is definitely grinning ear to ear now; we can hear it in the laughter in his sentence.]

ARCHIVIST

True.

MARTIN

Besides, we can *help* them now.

[The Archivist sighs; they both start getting back on the road.]

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. *(pause)* Yeah.

[Their footsteps crunch as they walk.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG176 – Blood Ties

Statement ########-16

[EXT. A DOMAIN OF THE HUNT]

[TAPE CLICKS ON.]

[The bags jingle and the ground crunches as the Archivist and Martin walk through what sounds like dense-ish foliage. The air is still, but in the way that still air can be "loud," obtrusive in the background.]

ARCHIVIST

Hold on, take it easy.

[The bags jingle again as they come to a stop.]

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

I'm going at a normal pace; you're the one that's slowing down!

ARCHIVIST

(quite put out) I am *not*.

MARTIN

You are!

[They're both making an attempt to whisper/keep their voices low even as they argue.]

MARTIN

You're dragging your feet. What's up? *(beat)* What aren't you telling me?

[In the background, a bird trills loudly.]

ARCHIVIST

Martin, please. I'm trying to find our way to Basira.

MARTIN

(:)) Talk to me, John.

ARCHIVIST

I'm **fine**.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

Glad to hear. And the fact that we're hunting our friend in a domain *of* the Hunt isn't getting to you at *all?* Not even a little bit? Hmm?

[The bird keeps going.]

ARCHIVIST

I don't like betraying someone's trust like this.

MARTIN

(gentle) It's not a betrayal if you're doing it to help.

ARCHIVIST

(rueful half-laugh) I'm not so sure.

MARTIN

Look, if it was me in her shoes, I'm sure I'd forgive you. It-It's for the best!

ARCHIVIST

Mm.

MARTIN

Look, you'll feel better about it when it's done. Okay? Putting it off – it's, it's just going to make you feel worse.

ARCHIVIST

(slightly lower) Mm.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

Besides, I thought the Hunt was meant to make you go faster.

ARCHIVIST

Depends on the type of pursuit. *(exhale)* Besides, the chase isn't really the point of this particular place.

MARTIN

Oh no?

ARCHIVIST

No.

MARTIN

…I can't believe I'm asking this, but what *is* the point, then?

ARCHIVIST

…Have you ever had your friends turn on you? People you thought you could count on?

[Martin makes a couple of sounds that translate to *how to put this?*]

MARTIN

I mean… *(another sound of indecision)* I, I worry about it, but – but, actually, no? Not like a full-blown betrayal or anything.

ARCHIVIST

I'm glad. *(inhale)* Because this place focuses on that worry, that fear of your own pack turning their claws on you.

[Martin lets out a little *hm*.]

MARTIN

Is that… really a Hunt thing?

ARCHIVIST

Can be. The old divisions don't mean as much these days. Maybe they never did. The domains are… smaller, more – personal than the powers.

They don't just *feed* on the worst fears of the people trapped there; they're *shaped* by them, too. It's enough to fear the domain itself, if not the entire power behind it.

[Martin does another little *hm*.]

MARTIN

(somewhat begrudgingly) You should get that on a mug. 'You don't

have to fear the Hunt to be trapped here…'

ARCHIVIST

(exhales) But it helps.

MARTIN

Look, so can we just – move on?

[He takes a step.]

ARCHIVIST

Soon.

MARTIN

Look, John, I didn't want to say this, but we either need to move *on* or you need to tell me what's *going* on because – *(breaks off, steadying inhale)* I think we're being followed.

ARCHIVIST

(no hesitation) We are.

MARTIN

Oh. 'Kay. That's not actually what I wanted to hear.

ARCHIVIST

I know, that's why I didn't mention it before.

MARTIN

(inhale) But we're *safe*, right?

ARCHIVIST

As long as you remain calm, yes, absolutely.

[Pause.]

MARTIN

So – So are you *going* to tell me what's going on? What the plan is?

ARCHIVIST

We're going to find Basira.

MARTIN

(passive-aggressiveness kicking in) No, John, that's the *goal*. *(faster)* What I want is the plan, the steps in between that need us to be hunted through the woods. I'm flying *blind* here, I'm –

[The bird from earlier starts up again, and Martin falters into silence.]

ARCHIVIST

(exhaling) Yeah. I'm sorry. I do know what I'm doing.

MARTIN

How nice for you, but *I don't*, unless you tell me! How-How are you even going to approach Basira?

[Bird.]

ARCHIVIST

It's tricky. She's – *(inhale)* She's had a bad time.

MARTIN

(slight scoff) I mean – haven't we all?

ARCHIVIST

No. No, we haven't.

[Slight pause, and then:]

MARTIN

Right.

ARCHIVIST

If we approach her directly, she's likely to bolt. And she can move a lot quicker than we can.

MARTIN

Yeah, okay, but I'm still not hearing a plan as such.

ARCHIVIST

I –

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

Uh – Hold on.

MARTIN

Oh my god, are you actually serious, right now?

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry!

[Martin sighs.]

MARTIN

Fine. Just – I'll keep a lookout, be quick.

ARCHIVIST

I'll do my best.

[He rustles his way through the surroundings a bit to put some distance between him and Martin.]

[Then, his static kicks in, and:]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Feet pound silent whisper silent blood on lips blood on teeth blood scent of hated prey flows through veins and into feet pound silent in pursuit.

Teeth smile. Ready to kill.

[In the background, under his words, we hear the jagged breath of someone running, someone running in fear.]

The lashing branches reach and claw and try to hold back the charging vengeance of the pack. But they slip, and fall away.

The killers make no sound as they move across the forest floor, their steps quick and certain.

[We hear them running.]

In the distance they hear the crashing stumble of the one who *deserves* to be hunted, all stealth forgotten in the panicked flight from righteous cleansing violence.

There are no names among the pack, no words, only a razor-keen unity of purpose, a shared loathing of the sickly scent of the one they chase.

A mutual determination that their quarry does not deserve to live.

If any were able to form the words to express them, no doubt the crimes listed of their prey would be as varied as the pack themselves, and some, perhaps, even true.

But that is not important, not really. Not the driving, pounding need behind the hunt, what spurs pursuit of tooth and claw is not some calmly made assessment or judgement on the weight of the hunted's sin.

It is the need to tear and rend and coat their faces slick with the blood of the guilty that pulses through every fibre of them. The thumping need inside their head to *hate*, and to be *right* within that hate. To taste the blood of those who have declared themselves *deserving* of it.

But as the pack runs, each and all among them are afraid.

Of what?

The pounding in their heart drowns out the unease, makes it hard to taste and feel it out, but it is there.

Are they afraid of their prey, fleeing in abject terror, their trail marked clear by the scent of fear? No, it can't be.

But what else could it be? Surely not their packmates, sprinting along the side, leaping, jumping, grinning in anticipation, moving as a group, their minds as one, never looking each other in the eye.

Up ahead, the quarry trips, cries out, tumbles to the floor in a desperate heap. They try to stagger to their feet but they are caught

in the undergrowth, ankle twisted, vine wrapped around it.

They already lost their boots, and now their bare and muddy foot is trapped, flesh and dirt and oozing blood, the blood that fills the nostrils of these hunters, and drives their furious chase with the awful scent of its transgression.

Tears flow, too, but no one notices, and no one *cares*. Their punishment is at hand.

In moments, the prey is surrounded. The spaces between the trees are filled with eyes that hate and hands that hold the promise of a life ended on the rotting leaves of the forest floor.

They smile, and their teeth glint in the moonlight, still red with all that remains of their last morsel of prey.

They begin to step closer. One step. Two steps. When the prey turns, they are still, but they surround in all directions, moving slowly when they are not being watched.

What's the time, Mr. Wolf? The time to run is over. The time to *suffer* has arrived.

But there is one last burst of strength within the prey. Not strength of arm, or speed of escape – what good is fight-or-flight in this place? But a strength of voice, of bitter, *angry* recrimination. Hurling accusations upon their pursuers: *hypocrites,bullies,pathetic wretches that would hound the innocent so.*

Perhaps the prey earnestly believes it, casts themself full woeful

into the mold of victim, of one who has done no wrong.

Or perhaps they feel within themself the weight of the sin stinking out of them, flaring the hearts of their persecutors, but see in the faces that approach them those same transgressions shining, reflected back upon them.

It doesn't matter in the end; the cry is the same: "This isn't *fair*. This isn't *right*."

The pack descends and the prey is silenced, protests cut short by teeth digging into throat, nails piercing skin and clawing at gristle, bones shattering under relentless, *merciless* blows.

And the blood and bile flow freely, exciting the pack to ever-greater raptures of cruelty, of pure and cleansing rage.

They taste their fury in every corner of them. There is no sound to break their peace but the wet ripping of flesh and the occasional transcendent scream of deserved agony.

And then it is over.

There is a moment, a single, holy moment of blessed absolution, washed clean in sweet and sticky blood.

And then the unease returns. The uncertainty and fear that at some moments gripped them throughout their pursuit.

They look around from one to another, aware as they stand over the twitching remains, that they are suddenly without prey.

Expressions sharpen, eyes narrow, growls begin to bubble up deep from within each chest. They are afraid.

They can each smell it wafting from the others, but who will it be? Who is the most afraid?

Which of them held back? Which of them – *there*. You. Blood on your hands, no doubt; blood on your lips – but not much. Not much at all.

Perhaps you couldn't get close enough; there were so many hunters, after all. Or perhaps you stayed your hand out of mercy. Out of… sympathy.

Perhaps you stink of that same sin.

No words need to be spoken, no accusations put in so coarse a form as voice. The pack immediately knows which among them is no longer theirs, which has exposed their own inequity.

Which is now prey.

[We hear the singled-out ex-Hunter gasp and turn to run.]

The prey turns and runs, all grace of the Hunt forgotten as they stumble, crashing through undergrowth and dirt.

Behind them, feet pound silent.

[Static rises and fades.]

[The Archivist exhales.]

ARCHIVIST

I'm done.

[Pause, and then he picks his way back.]

ARCHIVIST

You alright?

MARTIN

(snapping) Just *peachy*. *(softening)* I don't – I don't know; I feel like I saw something in the trees.

ARCHIVIST

You did.

MARTIN

(clearly on edge) Oh! Fantastic. You're very reassuring, you know that?

[The bird trills again as he speaks.]

MARTIN

Is it that – pack thing you were talking about?

ARCHIVIST

No, they'd have – *(inhale, quick exhale)* They'd have no interest in us. We're not one of them.

MARTIN

Look, John, if – if you know what it is, then why don't you just *tell me,* so that –

ARCHIVIST

(overlapping) Hold up.

Sh.

[But Martin has reached his limit:]

MARTIN

Wh– no! No, John; you just *did* a statement; I don't *care* if you want another one, we've gotta move –

ARCHIVIST

(cutting him off) Martin.

[Martin stops.]

[Pause, in which there is some quiet movement.]

ARCHIVIST

Right. Martin, do you trust me?

MARTIN

What? Ah, *Christ*, this can't be good. Yes?

ARCHIVIST

Then it's very – listen, *(movement)* – look at me. The next couple of minutes are going to be quite unpleasant for one of us, and I'm sorry.

MARTIN

Uh – *(sounds of incomprehension)* Sorry, what?

ARCHIVIST

You need to remain very calm, and don't make any sudden movements.

MARTIN

Oh, okay, *now* I'm worried; what d'you –

[He's cut off by a rush of movement; his words turn to tiny gasps, and then are cut off completely – hand over his mouth?]

[Something – no, some*one* – growls.]

TREVOR HERBERT

*(with some desperation) Don't move! Don't you **fucking** move!*

[Martin gasps out a choked breath.]

TREVOR

(to the Archivist) And don't *you* say a word, or I'll cut him open! I know what that voice of yours can do, so *shut it!*

ARCHIVIST

(best customer service voice) Mhm.

[There is silence but for Trevor's ragged breathing for a moment.]

[Then:]

TREVOR

(exhaling) Okay. You can talk. But slow-like. You try and do any of that – *word magic*, and he's dead.

ARCHIVIST

(slowly) Understood.

[Trevor exhales heavily.]

ARCHIVIST

Hello, Trevor.

MARTIN

(afraid, trying not to show it) John? What's going on?

ARCHIVIST

It's okay. Trust me.

MARTIN

(high) Okay.

TREVOR

It's *not* okay. Stop *fucking* smiling!

[He must tighten his grip, because Martin lets out a pained sound.]

MARTIN

(voice shaking, trying to sound unaffected) John? I know you keep saying we're safe, and I am feeling very calm, but just so I know – Can he – Can he kill me?

ARCHIVIST

He could, yes.

MARTIN

Right.

ARCHIVIST

If he were still a Hunter.

TREVOR

(hissing) Shut it. ‘Course I’m still a Hunter!

[He tightens his grip or digs in the knife or emphasizes whatever he’s got again; Martin lets out a slightly louder pained sound.]

[Trevor’s breathing is heavy, and he grunts.]

MARTIN

(the customer is always right!) Mmhmhm – gotta go with Trevor on that one, John!

ARCHIVIST

(low) No. Right now he’s prey.

[The bird from earlier trills.]

ARCHIVIST

How long have you been running now, Trevor?

[Trevor's breathing becomes even more ragged, more fearful.]

TREVOR

Don't know. Too long.

ARCHIVIST

And Julia?

[Pause. Bird.]

TREVOR

Dead.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry.

TREVOR

Shut it!

[But it's tearful. It's lost some of its bite.]

TREVOR

Should've been me. I'm old. Slow. *(breathing harder, tearful)* It's not

fair, outliving her.

But that dog of yours, that rabid *bitch* – she – *(loses words)* Killed her first, so she could see me limp away.

It's a game to her.

ARCHIVIST

If you're looking for my pity, I'm afraid it's too late.

MARTIN

John…?

TREVOR

(gaining fuel again) What I *want*, is to make *you* feel the *same* loss!

MARTIN

(!!) John!

ARCHIVIST

It's *okay*, Martin. *(to Trevor)* Maybe I spoke too soon. Maybe I do have some pity for you.

After all, I know you, Trevor; you've had a tough life. Hardship from beginning to – *(small heh)* This strange and twisted end.

TREVOR

Never complained.

ARCHIVIST

No. You haven't, have you? And maybe that's the greatest tragedy of all this.

I'm – sorry, Trevor.

[Silence but for Trevor's breathing, which slowly gains in intensity.]

TREVOR

*For **what?***

ARCHIVIST

For putting us all in this situation. I had hoped you'd go for me, but – well.

I'm sorry I've reduced you lower even than prey.

MARTIN

John?…

[Trevor snorts, but not in an offhand way. In the way that a cornered horse or bull might.]

TREVOR

No.

ARCHIVIST

To *bait.*

MARTIN

(breathing faster) Don't –

[Gunshot.]

[Martin whimpers.]

MARTIN

(recovering, high) Oh-hoh. *Hoh. Christ,* you just – He jus–

[He lets out an incomprehensible sound.]

ARCHIVIST

Relax, Martin.

MARTIN

*(**very** high)* I, I'm not gonna – I'm not gonna *relax*; I'm sick of never knowing what's going on, and then –

[As he speaks, there are footsteps, coming closer across the brush.]

ARCHIVIST

Hello, Basira.

MARTIN

(exhale) I – E– *(more incomprehensible stuttering) Basira?*

BASIRA

Don't move. Either of you.

MARTIN

(still kinda high) Hey! Hey, hey. *Whoa.* Whoa, Basira, it's us.

BASIRA

I *said* don't move. This place plays tricks.

ARCHIVIST

It *is* us, Basira.

BASIRA

(yeah, right) Mhm? Sure. And you just happened to wander right into Trevor's path when I was tracking him. What a fun coincidence for everybody.

ARCHIVIST

Not a coincidence.

[The bird trills.]

MARTIN

(with some effort) Can I at least put my hands down? M-M,My arms are kinda getting tired.

BASIRA

Prove you're real.

MARTIN

I – *Wh,What?* Like, like – pinch… you, or?

[There's a tiny snicker from the Archivist as he trails off.]

BASIRA

Prove you're really Martin Blackwood.

MARTIN

How?

ARCHIVIST

(picture of innocence) You could do a poem.

BASIRA

Shut up.

MARTIN

*(hissing) John, this is **serious**!*

BASIRA

What's something only Martin would know?

[Pause.]

MARTIN

What? I don't know!

BASIRA

Fine. Then –

[We hear her cock the gun.]

MARTIN

No-no-no-no-no-no-no-no, wait, wait, uh – I – oh, I don't know, we've never hung out much! I've no idea what you know about me!

[Pause as Basira considers this. Another, different bird screeches in the background.]

[Basira shifts to the Archivist.]

BASIRA

What about you?

ARCHIVIST

I mean – *(holding back laugh, badly)* I can know *literally* anything, so – ask away I guess.

BASIRA

You understand how unhelpful that is for proving identities.

ARCHIVIST

(audible grin) I'm sorry to be an inconvenience.

BASIRA

Well, you better think of something, or…

[She waggles the gun.]

ARCHIVIST

Basira, I *know* you're not going to shoot us. There's already too much doubt in your mind.

[Pause.]

BASIRA

I told you before not to look into my head.

ARCHIVIST

(smug) So you *do* believe it's me, then.

[Brief pause.]

BASIRA

Know-it-all prick.

[We hear her put the gun away.]

MARTIN

So – Can I – ?

BASIRA

Yeah, put them down, Martin. It's fine. You're you.

[Martin does so, and in the process lets out a huge sigh of relief. And another. And another, as Basira and the Archivist keep talking:]

ARCHIVIST

You're sure?

BASIRA

If you were monsters, that would mean I'd finally get to kill something with your smug face. No way am I that lucky.

ARCHIVIST

Can't fault your logic.

BASIRA

Come on. You've wasted enough time already.

MARTIN

Wh– *(sputtering)* Wh– Hey, wait!

BASIRA

I *said* come on!

[She starts walking.]

MARTIN

Wh–! *Wh–! John?*

[The Archivist just shoulders his bag with a jingle.]

ARCHIVIST

*(enjoying this **way** too much) After you.*

[Martin sighs.]

[TAPE CLICKS OFF.]

MAG177 – Wonderland

Statement ########-17

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS ECHO IN A CORRIDOR, A TANNOY MUMBLES WORDS INDISTINCTLY AND TINNY MUZAK PLAYS FAINTLY]

MARTIN

Look, this is ridiculous, Basira. Can we please just talk?

BASIRA

No.

MARTIN

Why not?

ARCHIVIST

Martin…

MARTIN

[Exasperated] No, John. Enough is enough. It has been *hours* and not a bloody word! We have been slogging our way through literal *nightmares* to find you, Basira. There's been p-plagues and wars and

monsters and I– *we've* been worried sick. It has been *awful* and the least that –

BASIRA

Can't have been that bad.

MARTIN

I – what?

BASIRA

You look *fine* to me.

MARTIN

[Indignant] Excuse me?

BASIRA

Whole and healthy with a shoulder to lean on every step of the way.

MARTIN

Basira…

ARCHIVIST

[Softly] Martin, leave it.

Trust me. She's been through a lot more than we have.

MARTIN

I-It's not a competition! Christ! I just wanted to *talk*. That's all.

BASIRA

So talk.

MARTIN

I mean stop and talk.

[FOOTSTEPS STOP]

BASIRA

I'd love that, Martin. I really would. Unfortunately, you two cost me my only lead on Daisy. And I need to find her before she moves on. So unless you have something *useful* to say…

ARCHIVIST

[Wearily] Daisy's not here. She's *already* moved on.

BASIRA

What?

MARTIN

See, this is exactly the kind of thing that comes up when we *talk* –

BASIRA

[Impatient] Martin!

ARCHIVIST

I told you, I know everything now, more or less. I can see her. With my, uh…

BASIRA

…

Magic horrorvision?

ARCHIVIST

Sure.

MARTIN

It's actually been amazingly useful so far.

BASIRA

So you can control it now?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

Hmm.

MARTIN

So…

We know she's not here, and John can find her wherever she goes… it sounds to me like we actually *do* have a moment to talk. Hm?

…

You might not care but it *is* good to see you Basira. It has been a long time since we saw a friendly face.

BASIRA

Friendly wasn't what I was going for.

MARTIN

All I'm saying is, it's nice to find someone we can trust again. Ever since everything went to hell, it's just been –

BASIRA

Yeah, about that.

[Pointedly to The Archivist] You caused this, didn't you?

[THE ARCHIVIST GIVES A HEAVY BREATH]

Don't give me that look, you *know* what I mean. **Did** you mess up the world? Yes or no.

ARCHIVIST

…

Yes.

BASIRA

God*damn*it! I knew it was you! I *knew* it!

MARTIN

Basira…

ARCHIVIST

I didn't mean to. Elias was…

We were all playing out this big ritual for him. With me as the lynchpin, the gate.

BASIRA

Oh you didn't *mean* to! Oh that's all right then. Christ! I should've known… I… I should've just let Daisy take you out at the start.

MARTIN

You don't mean that.

BASIRA

No?

[Exhales] I don't know. Maybe. If I had… it would have stopped all this, wouldn't it?

ARCHIVIST

Perhaps.

Perhaps not.

BASIRA

I thought you knew everything?

MARTIN

He can’t do hypotheticals.

BASIRA

And if I killed you now?

MARTIN

What did I just say?

ARCHIVIST

You couldn’t. And even if you could, it wouldn’t be enough to undo what’s happened to the world.

BASIRA

So… what? You’re the immortal god of this messed up little hellscape now?

ARCHIVIST

‘God’ might be stretching it. *[Deep breath]* But I am more powerful now, yes.

BASIRA

Brilliant.

MARTIN

…

Okay, well since we’re talking, I-I was wondering… I don’t know if, if I missed it, or if you both just assumed that I knew, since you knew it already, but, well…

BASIRA

Spit it out.

MARTIN

What was the deal with Trevor? Why was he… I mean, I’m not really sure what happened back there?

BASIRA

Seriously? You brought him here, and you didn’t brief him, Mr. All-Seeing-Eye?

MARTIN

Oh, he just keeps being vague and ominous.

BASIRA

Well, some things don't change then.

ARCHIVIST

It was a *courtesy*. I wasn't sure what you'd be comfortable with me sharing.

BASIRA

Oh how generous.

MARTIN

Basira…

We *want* to help you.

BASIRA

…

So, when everything went sideways at the institute, I lost track of Daisy and Julia Montauk. I know Daisy managed to kill her, but I don't know the details. Didn't find any sign of them in the Archives, at least.

ARCHIVIST

It was about a week later. They'd been stalking each other through the tunnels beneath the city. Daisy managed to corner her in an old subway access, and tore out her throat. Trevor found the body three

hours later.

BASIRA

[Irritated] Do *you* want to tell it?

ARCHIVIST

Sorry. I thought you'd want me to fill in on the missing details.

BASIRA

I don't.

Anyway, seems like since then Trevor was tracking Daisy. Wanted revenge, you heard him. I was still in the Institute when everything went to hell outside, so I guess that protected me from the first wave. Once I saw what had happened… that we'd lost…

Didn't feel like there was anything left worth doing, except keeping my promise to Daisy. So I went looking. Found Trevor's trail eventually and started tailing him. Hoped I could follow him as he tracked Daisy, but… then *you* had to blunder your way in as always, and I had to step in.

MARTIN

Sorry.

BASIRA

It's his fault. He used you to bait Trevor, to bait me.

MARTIN

Wait, I'm, I'm sorry, you used me as *bait*?

ARCHIVIST

I used *us* as bait. I didn't know which one he'd go for.

MARTIN

Yeah, sure, but… only one of us was *aware* of the plan.

ARCHIVIST

I'm, I'm sorry. I was going to tell you, but then I-I got distracted and… then we were within earshot of him, and I couldn't say anything and… I-I mean, you would have agreed, right?

MARTIN

That's not the point, John.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry.

MARTIN

…

It's okay. I understand.

[FABRIC RUSTLES]

BASIRA

You done?

ARCHIVIST

Can we not have a moment?

BASIRA

No, John, we can't. This is a chase, remember? Time is a factor.

ARCHIVIST

Less than you might think.

So what happens next?

BASIRA

What do you think? You just cost me my only lead to Daisy. All I have now is you, and you owe me.

ARCHIVIST

So I guide you to Daisy.

BASIRA

Is she close?

ARCHIVIST

When did I become everybody's satnav?

BASIRA / MARTIN

John.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, alright.

[FAINT STATIC]

No, not really. She *was* here, but the corridors of this place are… Rushing isn't going to close the distance faster. It's more about *how* we choose to move through these domains rather than our speed.

BASIRA

What does *that* mean?

MARTIN

I've been with him the whole way and I still don't know.

ARCHIVIST

It means we'll reach her quicker if you stop tearing off, and let me concentrate on finding a proper path through this place.

MARTIN

Yeah, speaking of, where actually are we, anyway? I mean, I'm happy to be out of the woods, but –

ARCHIVIST

Wonderland House. A, uh… mental ‘health’ facility.

MARTIN

Oh. Oh dear.

ARCHIVIST

Mmhm.

Right. Daisy. Give me a moment.

[LOUDER STATIC]

BASIRA

So… Did you actually walk all the way down here from Scotland?

MARTIN

Kind of. Scotland’s not really a thing anymore.

BASIRA

Huh. London’s still there. Sort of.

MARTIN

Yeah, that’s where we’re heading. Eventually.

He’s been destroying other avatars on the way.

BASIRA

Oh. That's… good, I guess. How's he doing it?

MARTIN

He's getting the Eye to, like… like, look at them? H-He just kind of drinks up all their fear and they, uh, they just sort of… implode?

BASIRA

Sounds satisfying.

MARTIN

Yeah. Not sure how much good it does, though. And one of them was a kid.

BASIRA

John killed a kid?

MARTIN

What? No. No! No, I just mean, one of the avatars we saw was, like, thirteen or so.

BASIRA

That's messed up.

MARTIN

Yeah. We had to let him go, 'cause… well, I mean…

BASIRA

Yeah.

MARTIN

Yeah.

BASIRA

…

What's it like? Being with someone who can see the inside of your head?

MARTIN

Hm? Oh. Oh no, he doesn't. I told him not to, and so he tries to… look away.

BASIRA

And you trust him to do that.

MARTIN

[Certain] Yes. I do.

BASIRA

…

So what's your plan?

MARTIN

Long term? Elias. He's up in that… Panopticon tower thing.

BASIRA

Figured as much. What's he up to?

MARTIN

John doesn't know. He says it's a 'blind spot'.

BASIRA

A blind spot.

MARTIN

A-Apparently.

BASIRA

Convenient. What about Melanie?

MARTIN

He's… not sure about her either. He can't see her or Georgie.

BASIRA

Dead, then.

[STATIC FADES]

ARCHIVIST

No. Not dead. Just hidden somehow.

BASIRA

Back with us, then?

ARCHIVIST

I know the route. Come on.

[FOOTSTEPS START AGAIN]

It… will take us past Daisy's victim, though.

MARTIN

Victim?

BASIRA

She's been killing.

MARTIN

What? No, no, that can't be right. I thought people weren't even allowed to die any more.

ARCHIVIST

Not permanently, but… Ah.

[FOOTSTEPS STOP]

BASIRA

What is it?

MARTIN

Really? *Now*?

ARCHIVIST

I'll try to be quick.

BASIRA

What's going on?

MARTIN

It's, it… he needs to make a statement.

BASIRA

Is that like a euphemism or…?

MARTIN

Ew, no! It's… um, he sort of describes the place he's in to the recorder and… Look it's, it's magic Eye stuff. He can't help it. He needs to do it and if he doesn't…

BASIRA

He gets constipated?

ARCHIVIST

Hardly!

MARTIN

Actually, yeah, basically.

BASIRA

Right.

ARCHIVIST

Look if you can both just give me some space, I'd appreciate it.

MARTIN

Fine. I'll keep lookout.

[MARTIN MOVES AWAY]

BASIRA

No. If it's information about this domain, I think I'd better hear it.

ARCHIVIST

[Sighingly] If you say so…

[STATIC RISES]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

[FOOTSTEPS, A TELEPHONE RINGS]

Hi. How are we doing? You can call me Doctor David. I'll be here to help you out for the duration of your stay with us. Do you have a name? Hm. Hm. Well, I'm afraid I'll have to disagree with you there. That's not your name at all.

Now don't get agitated, I'm sure we'll get there. Names are… tricky. You know how long it took me to realise I was Doctor David? I mean, neither do I, to be perfectly honest, but the point is names can take a while. And we'll be here to support you every step of the way.

Hm? Oh, didn't they tell you when you were signed in? Not to worry, these things slip my mind as well sometimes. You're in Wonderland House. We're a small residential mental health facility here to help people like *you* come to their senses. And to protect the world from all your self-indulgent nonsense in the meantime.

I can, I assure you. I'm your doctor. Doctor David. I'm here to help you, to treat you, to make it so you're less of a… burden to everyone. And until I'm satisfied that we've reached that point, well, there's plenty here to keep you comfortable. Because obviously, it wouldn't be responsible of us to let you out into general society. Not in your *current* state. Hm? No, of course it's not just them. We're here to help you. *You're* the biggest victim of… whatever little game you're playing here. And we know just how to

help you.

Please do try not to get so agitated. I understand, it's a distressing time, but there's really nothing to be gained from… acting out. There are no windows to escape through, all the –

[SOUND OF CHAIR ROCKING]

Yes, as I was saying, all the furniture is very firmly bolted down, and honestly you're only going to hurt yoursel–

[SOMETHING SNAPS]

Hm. I see. Violence, then, is it? Oh, I assure you there is no way to hurt me. Nothing you could say or do could cause me even a moment's inconvenience. Your anger is… pointless. Meaningless. Look, see? The only thing you've managed to hurt is your own hand. Now, are we finally in a position to listen to Doctor David, you… meaningless little brat? Good.

Now, I believe it's time for your medication.

[PILLS RATTLE]

Oh, no, that stuff you were on before? Mm, garbage. No, I've torn up your prescription for that. It was… poison, I assure you, warping your mind. No, I think we have something far better here.

[PILLS RATTLE]

Go on, take it.

[PILL BOTTLE IS PLACED DOWN]

Take it.

Or do I have to get some orderlies to help you?

[LIQUID SWALLOWING; CUP IS PLACED DOWN]

There you go. Down the hatch. I wonder what it was? Certainly it looked a pretty appealing colour in the medicine cabinet, but you never can tell with these things. Oh, there you go. Well, sweet dreams, I suppose.

Do try to wake up sane.

[EXIT WITH CREEPY LAUGH]

[DOOR NOISES PLUS FOOTSTEPS]

Ah, awake at last, are we? Excellent. Allow me to introduce myself. Call me Doctor David. And you might be? No, I just like to greet all our new arrivals in person and I would like your name, if possible. Okay, well, I don't think that's how it's pronounced, but… if that's what you'd like me to call you, then I suppose I can do you that

favour.

Hm? No, I'm pretty sure I would remember.

No, I'm the only Doctor David on staff at Wonderland House. Goodness can you imagine the coincidence if there were two of us. Hah! Hardly bears thinking about. But no, I'm the only one here. Fact of the matter is, I'm the only doctor on staff. Most days it's just me and the orderlies. No-one else around for miles.

You're sure? Well, that is *very* strange. Would you mind describing this 'other' Doctor David. Mmhm? Mmhm? Oh, did he now? Well isn't that fascinating.

Right, well, I think I'm starting to see what might be going on here and, let me assure you, it isn't going to work. Oh, I know, I know, I know. It's just that we have no patience here for your ridiculous lies. Seeing things? Phantom doctors? You really think I'm that much of an idiot? You concoct some half-baked little hallucination, and suddenly I'm stamping 'crazy' on your forehead? I'm dreadfully sorry to disappoint you, but that's not how things work here.

Oh, other doctors did, did they? Mm. Well, that sounds reasonable, let me just have a look at your case file here, a gander at the old medical history. Medication, diagnosis, medication, oooh, hospitalisation. Hm.

Trouble is it's all lies, isn't it? Because I'm your doctor now, Doctor David, and I say these people, these 'professionals', had no idea what they're talking about because, well, I understand what they

simply didn't.

You made it all up, didn't you?

What was it? A plea for attention, trying so desperately to make the world notice you? Some *childish* attempt to feel special? Or were you just looking for an excuse for the fact that you're a lazy, unlikeable waste of air?

'Paranoia', hm, it's big word, isn't it? A *big* excuse. Because here's the interesting thing: you are completely sane and rational. Everyone legitimately *does* hate you. It's not your brain making up lies, don't be stupid. No, you're just a horribly unpleasant person to be around. You make people uncomfortable. You never say the right thing. You somehow always manage to smell bad.

No wonder people talk about you behind your back. Even I hate you, and I'm responsible for your treatment. Isn't that funny?

[MIRTHLESS CHUCKLE]

Hm? Oh, I'm sure you would like some medication. Yes, I'm sure you would. That chemical safety blanket whispering to you 'Oh don't worry you're just mad. You don't need to take responsibility for anything.' You'll get none of that nonsense here. No. We'll teach you to stand on your own two feet. And we have all the time in the world to do so.

[FOOTSTEPS, THEN DOOR SOUNDS]

Good night.

[DOOR SOUNDS, FOOTSTEPS. THE DISTANT SOUND OF SCREAMS]

Ah, good morning. How are we feeling today? Hm? Oh, no it's just me. Call me Doctor David. No, I'm pretty sure I've always had this face.

Oh, I see, another of your lies, is it, as though I haven't heard enough of them in the, what, five years I've been treating you now. No matter. Yes, five years, can we please not start that again?

Did you sleep well? Hm? Well, that makes sense I suppose. Nightmares are to be expected from a mind like yours.

Ooh, monsters, you say? You must have gotten a look at Brian the orderly.

[MIRTHLESS, SOMEWHAT MANIC, CHUCKLING]

I joke, of course. You seem fine, though, so I'm sure whatever that silly little imagination of yours concocted, it can't have been all *that* bad.

Oh, yes? More 'hallucinations'? Hm, well, you can describe them to me if you like, I'm certain they're quite horrible. But on other hand, they didn't happen, you're lying, and everyone wishes you'd just stop making a fuss. You remember your mother, what you made her

do because you just couldn't be bothered to pull yourself together?

Yes, of course it was your fault, we've been over this quite extensively in our earlier sessions. Or are you still pretending not to remember?

I really wish you'd stop saying that. We don't really like the word 'mad' in Wonderland House. Because you're not. You never have been. You just need to… Oh do calm down you hysterical little creep. Throwing another tantrum will get you nowhere here.

[SOUNDS OF MOVEMENT, SOMETHING FALLING]

Oh violence, is it? Very original. Just do be careful not to –

[SOUNDS OF MOTION, A SCUFFLE, THEN FLESH PEELING]

[DRIPPING NOISES]

Well, I hope you're happy. Well, what did you expect to be under my face? You really should stop screaming, you're only upsetting yourself. Of course it's real, it's absolutely real. I've told you, you're quite sane. You just need to admit it, and then we can get on with things.

No rush, though, like I say. We have all the time in the world. And good old Doctor David isn't going anywhere.

[STATIC SOUNDS]

[DEEP EXHALATION]

ARCHIVIST

Satisfied?

BASIRA

Fuck.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS ECHO IN A CORRIDOR, TINNY MUZAK PLAYS FAINTLY]

BASIRA

No, I get that bit, it's just… So the guy *was* mad, or…?

ARCHIVIST

No, it – it… I mean, yes. It's sort of, like… gaslighting, but in reverse. This place, it's built on the fear that your mental health problems aren't actually real.

BASIRA

Wouldn't that be a good thing?

ARCHIVIST

N-No… I'm not explaining it very well. Uh, it's… It's the worry that everything is, is awful, and it's actually your fault. Th-That you made it up? Um… that you're…

BASIRA

What?

ARCHIVIST

Bad therapists. Let's just say it's the fear of bad therapists, filtered through The Spiral.

BASIRA

That's.. a lot more nuanced than I've gotten used to since everything went wrong.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, well, The Spiral is nothing if not insidious.

MARTIN

[Nervously] Uh… Is that door meant to be open? And… dripping blood.

ARCHIVIST

We're here.

[DOOR CREAKS]

MARTIN

Oh, Jesus.

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Horrible way to go.

BASIRA

You're sure this is Daisy's handiwork?

ARCHIVIST

Positive. She'd been prowling around for a long time, waiting for a gap in the 'treatments' And when she got one, she carved through the door like it was paper. He tried to run, but she was so fast. She took his legs first, slicing through the tendons so that he could –

BASIRA

Enough. We get it.

…

Let's go, then.

MARTIN

Wait, what? That's it?

BASIRA

What else is there?

MARTIN

Seriously? I mean, who *is* this guy? Daisy slaughters someone, and you don't even want to know why? You… What, you don't care?

BASIRA

[Uncomfortably] We don't have time.

ARCHIVIST

…

I could tell you.

BASIRA

Don't bother. I know who he is.

MARTIN

What?

BASIRA

[Sigh] Noah Thomson. Nasty piece of work. Crossed him a few times when we weren't doing sectioned work. Last I heard he'd dodged a GBH charge Daisy brought him in on. Blinded a guy during a

robbery. I guess she didn't forget.

MARTIN

Wait, wait… so… so, she's hunting down criminals? People who she thinks got away with stuff?

BASIRA

…

Sure.

ARCHIVIST

Really? As simple as that?

BASIRA

What's your point?

ARCHIVIST

What, you think he ended up in Wonderland House at random? We're just going to ignore it, and write him off as a 'nasty piece of work'?

BASIRA

We don't have *time* for this.

ARCHIVIST

Then we should make time. You want to hear how he ended up

blinding that man? Because it wasn't a robbery. He was running away from Daisy, lashing out in a panic. The court believed it. But *you* believed *her*…

BASIRA

[Angry] I told you not to look in my head!

ARCHIVIST

I didn't. And I won't. But you can't hunt a monster that you refuse to see.

[TENSE SILENCE]

[SOUND OF AN ELEVATOR ARRIVING WITH A SUDDEN 'BING']

[MARTIN JUMPS]

HELEN

Not interrupting anything, Am I?

MARTIN

Christ, Helen, you scared the life out of me.

HELEN

[Insincere] Sorry, darling.

ARCHIVIST

Not now, Helen.

HELEN

I'm sorry to butt in, but I was paying a visit to dear old Doctor David. You know, this place goes through nurses at an *alarming* rate, and I couldn't help but overhear your little problem.

BASIRA

Really don't need your opinion on this.

HELEN

Good to see you, too, Basira. You're looking well. And don't worry, I've no interest in your little ethical wobbles. No, I mean your issue with a certain feral runaway. I can help you, if you'd like.

ARCHIVIST

No, thank you.

BASIRA

What sort of help?

ARCHIVIST

You can't be serious…

HELEN

See, John, this is what I like to see! A proactive attitude, keen to

work together. Someone really living their best apocalypse.

BASIRA

I asked you a question.

HELEN

You did, didn't you? I can offer a shortcut. Take you right to that murder machine you call a partner.

MARTIN

Basira, John can't go through Helen's doors. We couldn't come with you.

HELEN

Basira is a strong, independent woman. She doesn't need you two holding her hand. Anyway, it'll be dead quick. Two minutes, door-to-door, quick shot to the back of Daisy's head, and we'll be home before you know it.

ARCHIVIST

…

You just heard what The Spiral does to people. You can't trust her.

HELEN

Nonsense! Martin can vouch for me. You and.. what's-his-name went through Michael's door, right? And he was rubbish compared

to me.

MARTIN

We were in there for two weeks.

HELEN

Exactly! And you're just fine! Better than fine! Flourishing!

MARTIN

You really don't care, do you?

HELEN

Alright, be like that. Under new management, anyway. So what's it going to be Basira darling? Quick and easy?

Or are you looking to take the long way round as a third wheel?

BASIRA

…

I'll stick with the guys, thanks.

[DISAPPOINTED NOISE]

HELEN

Such a shame. And here I thought *you* were actually going to follow through. Ah well, good luck. And do give my best to Daisy. If you

ever *do* find her.

BASIRA

You done?

HELEN

Oh, John? Not to sound like a squeaky hinge, but do try to lighten up. Don't get me wrong, the brooding thing's a good look on you, but it is starting to get a bit tired. Especially now you've got someone else to do the intense, driven thing. I think you might need to get a new schtick.

ARCHIVIST

[Sarcastic] Thank you for the feedback. I'll try to bear it in mind.

HELEN

It's all I ask! Anyway, I should be off. Don't want to be late for rounds. Ciao!

[FOOTSTEPS HEAD OFF]

MARTIN

Is it me or is she getting worse? I think I preferred it when she wasn't quite so… I don't know… Chummy?

ARCHIVIST

What? You thought the end of the world would bring out the best in her?

MARTIN

Hmm.

BASIRA

Now, can we just *go*?

ARCHIVIST

Sure. This way.

[CLICK]

MAG178 – The Processing Line

Statement ########–18

[CLICK]

[SOUNDS OF INDUSTRIAL PROCESSING, MOVING BODIES AND THE OCCASIONAL THUMP; SPEAKING VOICES ECHO IN THE CORRIDORS]

BASIRA

You're sure she came through here?

ARCHIVIST

Have I steered you wrong so far?

BASIRA

I don't know, do I? We haven't actually *found* her yet.

ARCHIVIST

We're getting closer.

BASIRA

Great.

MARTIN

Would you both just keep it down, please?

ARCHIVIST

They're not aware of us, Martin. I keep telling you.

MARTIN

Yeah, I know, but it's not okay to talk as though they're not *there*. They're still people.

ARCHIVIST

Uh… Technically, a lot of them actually *aren't* people.

BASIRA

Come again?

ARCHIVIST

A-A lot of them are created by this place as, uh, set dressing, I suppose? This domain, the fear of it requires these… queues, these… this intricate hateful bureaucracy of hundreds of thousands of doomed souls. It needs far more than the number of people who actually ended up here.

MARTIN

Wait, wait, wait. So… so it just… makes the rest of them up?

ARCHIVIST

Er, maybe one in a hundred or so are actually real. The rest are there to make those people's fears more acute.

MARTIN

That's… ugh, that's somehow more disturbing.

BASIRA

How do you tell which is which?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, you could ask me, I suppose. B-But I don't really see the point. Would it help you to know whose suffering is real and whose is just a grim reflection?

BASIRA

No.

ARCHIVIST

Well, there you go then.

MARTIN

Why are they queuing?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, I mean, I've been keeping us away from those rooms, but…

Well, it's a factory of The Flesh, Martin. Use your imagination.

MARTIN

…

No. No, I don't think I will.

ARCHIVIST

Wise.

BASIRA

So who's in charge here?

ARCHIVIST

Not anyone you're familiar with. We won't be meeting them.

MARTIN

You're not going to… y'know?

[MARTIN VOCALISES AN EXPLOSION]

ARCHIVIST

No. Even if I wanted to, he's in the, uh… Main Processing Room. And believe me when I say that's… not somewhere you want to be.

MARTIN

Yeah. I guess.

God, I hate all of these… loose ends.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry.

MARTIN

It's fine. We'll just have to tie them all up in one go.

ARCHIVIST

Hm?

MARTIN

Around Elias' neck.

ARCHIVIST

Ah.

BASIRA

[Impatiently] Which way?

ARCHIVIST

Left. Just up ahead. Although… uh, um, actually, you might want to head through *that* door and wait.

BASIRA

Again? Already?

ARCHIVIST

There's a lot of fear in this place.

MARTIN

What's in there?

ARCHIVIST

Tool cupboard. Safe enough place to wait.

BASIRA

Fine.

[DOOR OPENS AND METALLIC JANGLING IS HEARD]

MARTIN

[Emphatically] Nope.

BASIRA

What the hell sort of tools are those?

ARCHIVIST

Flesh factory, remember?

MARTIN

New plan. **We** wait in the corridor. **You** go in the spike cupboard, and tell your story to all the hooks and stuff.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Just don't wander off.

[MORE METALLIC JANGLES AS THE ARCHIVIST ENTERS AND CLOSES DOOR]

ARCHIVIST

Hm. It could be worse. At least they're clean.

[DEEP BREATH AS STATIC RISES]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Time has no meaning in this place, but that does nothing to lessen the certainty that Tyler has been in this line for years. A steady stream of sweat flows down his neck, staining his rough-weaved jumpsuit, and sticking the itchy material to the skin of his back. The heat of this place is intense, but more than that, it is the apprehension, the waiting, the inching step by step towards his own consumption. He wants to turn and run, to push past the endless row of desperate, weeping people and flee this place. But where would he go?

There is nowhere else, only the processing plant, and he's heard the stories of what happens if you don't get processed through the

official channels. It's messy and, more than that, they just throw the remains away. Nothing is used. And deep down, Tyler knows that's what he's for. He's there to be useful, and the thought of running from that scares him as much as whatever is waiting for him at the end of the line.

Another person processed, another step forward on the snaking line of bodies. Tyler tries for a moment to remember how he got here, where he was before this room of noise and heat and patient, waiting figures. It's faded now. He remembers aches and worries and, sometimes, something that might have been joy, but it's far away now, like something seen projected on a distant wall.

[GRUNTS AND SOUNDS OF PAPER RUSTLING]

Another step forward, and he's standing at a desk. The person behind it – is that a person? – wears a loose hood of coarse black leather. Below it they wear a featureless mask of the same material without a gap for eyes or mouth or even the shape of a nose. They wordlessly slide a form across to Tyler. His eyes travel down it: name, age, ethnicity, blood type, eye colour, body mass index, the list stretches on and on and on, and he can feel the stares of the thousands behind him burrowing into the back of his skull. He looks around, unable to find a pen, a pencil, anything. The thing sat behind the desk does not respond to his questions. Finally, Tyler takes his fingernail, now long and ragged from his time in the queue, and painstakingly scores the words into the paper. When one nail breaks, he uses another, until finally the information is carved

into the thick white paper of the form. The thing behind the desk nods, just once, and points him to another line, even longer than the first. Tyler feels his stomach drop as he walks slowly over to join it.

This gradual procession of the doomed leads not to a desk, but to a small room, partitioned off from the wider floor of the facility. What happens within it is not clear, but the looks of apprehension and despair on the faces around him are even more pronounced than they were before. Once again Tyler considers briefly trying to run, but there's nothing for it. Whatever the management has prepared for him at the end is what's coming for him. All he can do is wait for the axe to drop.

And wait he does, as the minutes turn into hours, turn into days, turn into years, which mean nothing in the thick torpor of congealed time. Once or twice Tyler tries to engage those in front or behind him in conversation, but gets only panicked weeping in response. He is silent; his only companion, the heavy dread that is gradually expanding through his gut.

Another step and he is at the door to the small room. It is riveted iron, not rusty, but clean and polished to a sterile shine. The only smell is the smell of cleaning products. The door finally opens, and another thing stands there. It is dressed like the one behind the desk, but stood to its full height it towers over Tyler in its leather apron. It grips him firmly by the shoulder in hands with the weight and texture of granite, and leads him into the room of clean and burnished metal. He tries not to stare at the implements that hang

on the wall as he is placed on a wide metal plate in the centre. He feels it yield slightly under his feet, and a weight appears on a screen set back into the wall. One of the things adjusting the equipment seems to become aware of this, though how it could have seen the measurement Tyler does not know, and it snatches the forms that he still carries from his hand. The noises that come from behind the mask seem to indicate the weight does not match what he has put down on his paperwork and, despite everything, Tyler is suddenly gripped with a panic that he might somehow be in trouble.

[MORE GRUNTING]

The disruption passes quickly and the things move on to other tests: poking, lifting, stretching his limbs, and assessing them with strange metal tools. Even if he had the will to, Tyler could not have struggled: the movements of the things scrutinizing him are as gently unstoppable as a piston. Finally, he is led over to a grate on the floor.

[SWIFT METALLIC NOISE]

He barely even has time to register the red-hot wire cutter before it is in and out of his left arm with practiced, professional ease, neatly removing a small wedge of muscle. There is almost a full second of numb confusion before the pain finally hits, and Tyler begins to scream.

The figures surrounding him do not seem to notice, instead fussing over the sample they have taken, examining it in minute detail, and silently conferring about it. Then they all nod at once, and the tiny chunk of meat is tossed away down a nearby disposal. One of them moves to the wall and picks up a long metal rod connected to an intricate arrangement of looping metal.

[METALLIC BUZZING STARTS]

Tyler is so preoccupied with the pain in his arm, he doesn't notice the switch turn on, or the metal begin to glow red with heat. When the brand hits him in the small of his back, he has no idea what is happening.

[FLESH SIZZLES; MORE GRUNTING ENSUES]

The sensation is so overwhelming that it's only after they push him out down a long metal chute and he finds himself at the back of another queue, he realises what has happened, as he sees the stamp of this place scorched into every back that stretches off into the distance.

This is the last processing line. Tyler can feel **that** truth deep inside him. There is no longer the wide open space surrounding them. Instead the head-height dividers lock them into single-file, snaking back and forth in a zig-zag as their path approaches the shining metal gate at the end. The ground is angled ever so slightly down, making it uncomfortable to stand still, and always gently urging

them to move forward. At last, the prospect of seeing what might happen if he runs from the line seems worth it to Tyler, but the realisation sets in that it is far, far too late for that.

One step, then another, then another. The production balance of this place means it must be impossible for this line to be moving quicker than the ones before it, but it seems to press on with a determination that makes Tyler feel faint. The interminable dread of the wait has dissipated into a very present panic of reaching the end of this line, but with every scream it seems to accelerate. All too soon he is through the gate.

In the room before the killing floor there are three things. A mirror, a diagram, and a thick, black, permanent marker. Tyler stares at himself, a hundred thoughts running through his head as he waits his turn on the floor. He could refuse, a final petty act of rebellion against a system it feels like he has run through a hundred times. But what would be the point of that? It won't save him. A wasted pile of discarded tissue is all that would be left. Is it not better, at least, to be useful? Tyler picks up the pen, and begins marking the cuts of meat upon his body. When he is done, he walks through the door.

[CRANKING METAL; A STUN GUN FIRES]

[GRUNTING AND CUTTING SOUNDS ENSUE]

The bolt goes through the back of his neck with a crack, and Tyler

feels himself fall, paralysed, to the floor. It does not kill him, though, and he watches as his limp body is hoisted onto the butcher's frame. They take their time as they disassemble him, making sure to let him see exactly what is about to happen at each step of the way. The last thing he sees before returning to the processing line, is everything going into the garbage. There wasn't a single suitable cut.

"Useless," one of the butchers says. And Tyler is gone.

[STATIC RISES AND DISSIPATES]

[DOOR OPENS, METAL JANGLES AGAIN]

MARTIN

– know you find it hard whe–

Done already?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Talking about me?

BASIRA

I assume that's a rhetorical question.

ARCHIVIST

I am trying to keep my powers to myself.

BASIRA

Sure.

MARTIN

I was just… giving Basira some advice.

ARCHIVIST

[Good-natured] Avatars are from Mars and humans are from Venus, that sort of thing?

MARTIN

I mean… yeah, sort of?

[BRIEF CHUCKLE FROM THE ARCHIVIST]

Well, w-we were pretty much done anyway.

ARCHIVIST

Great. Well in that case shall we move on?

BASIRA

After you.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[WALKING OFF, MARTIN JOSTLES A BODY]

MARTIN

Excuse me.

ARCHIVIST

[Exasperated] Martin, they can't hear you –

MARTIN

[Sharp] I know, John. That's not the point.

ARCHIVIST

Alright.

[MORE WALKING]

Next one's through here.

BASIRA

Next one?

ARCHIVIST

Her latest victim.

[DOOR IS WRENCHED OPEN WITH A METALLIC CREAK]

[MARTIN REELS, SOUNDS OF FLIES BUZZING]

Recognise her.

BASIRA

…

No… I don't think I do.

ARCHIVIST

That wasn't a question. It was an instruction. We can't move on until you do.

MARTIN

John, what are you getting at?

ARCHIVIST

This isn't just a journey through spaces.

BASIRA

…

Fine. I recognise her.

I don't know her name, though.

ARCHIVIST

Isabelle Moran. Shoplifter, drug addict. Daisy was certain she was

dealing as well. Derailed her recovery twice.

BASIRA

Fine. Noted.

Can we just move on, please?

ARCHIVIST

I'm afraid not.

BASIRA

Why not?

ARCHIVIST

We *aren't* finished here.

BASIRA

Is that a threat?

MARTIN

Guys come on… don't do this, not here.

ARCHIVIST

I told you before. We can't hunt a monster you refuse to see.

BASIRA

Don't give me that patronising, ominous-oracle bullshit, John. I'm

not an idiot.

ARCHIVIST

I never said you were.

MARTIN

Guys…

BASIRA

[Angry] Look, I need you to lead the way. I don't need your advice, and **certainly** don't need you stood there judging me!

MARTIN

[Loudly] Enough. Enough! Someone has died! Show some respect. Or don't you care?

BASIRA

[Incensed] Of course I fucking care!

…

[Quieter] That's the problem.

MARTIN

I… I don't understand.

BASIRA

I just… I don't need him laying everything out for me like I'm some kind of idiot. I know, all right. Daisy is the only person I could ever rely on and… and she… she did things, terrible things and I… I refused to see it or… said it was my duty or whatever, I don't know.

MARTIN

Basira…

BASIRA

I care, I just… I don't need to wallow in it. I need to end it. All of it.

MARTIN

…

We're here for you.

BASIRA

No. **She** was there for me.

ARCHIVIST

Cops vs. robbers and monsters…

BASIRA

I thought we were doing good. I really did. I knew there was some bad shit. I knew Daisy was into a lot of it, but… I thought it balanced out.

[Weakly] I thought we were good.

ARCHIVIST

[Softly] I know how that feels.

…

BASIRA

I wanted to help people, you know? When I first joined. Protect people. But then I saw what some of those same people were capable of, and… something changed. I wanted to hurt them, the ones that deserved it, and it… it felt good. It felt righteous.

I thought I could feel the line though. I really did. Eventually, though, it was too much… I was going to quit. I couldn't take what I saw myself becoming. But… then I got sectioned, and suddenly… suddenly it turned out there were real monsters out there, and, well, that just made the power feel better. So things kept slipping. But Daisy was always there for me.

MARTIN

All those innocent people…

BASIRA

Were they? Innocent?

ARCHIVIST

Some. And if not? What crime warrants what was done to them? Theft? Violence? Disrespect?

BASIRA

You knew her. She was trying to be better.

ARCHIVIST

She was.

But she never asked me to forgive her.

BASIRA

Forgive her?

ARCHIVIST

I've been scared, terrified for my life so many times these last few years. But I've never, not once, felt so horribly, abjectly, powerless as when she took me into that forest to kill me. I'll never forget it.

MARTIN

You never said…

ARCHIVIST

It's not easy to talk about.

MARTIN

Oh, John…

BASIRA

And would you have? Forgiven her?

ARCHIVIST

No. But she never asked me. She knew she had no right.

BASIRA

…

I really am going to have to kill her, aren't I?

ARCHIVIST

There's no way to bring her back. Not any more. At this point, if I tried to take away her fear… it would destroy her anyway.

BASIRA

Am I even going to be able to?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

And she stays dead?

ARCHIVIST

In this case, yes.

MARTIN

What about the powers?

ARCHIVIST

Dream logic, remember? She won't come back. Trust me.

BASIRA

…

Does she *want* me to kill her?

ARCHIVIST

She asked you to, didn't she?

BASIRA

No, I mean, right now? Is she suffering?

ARCHIVIST

…

No. Right now she's… She's happy.

[MARTIN REACTS]

BASIRA

Killing her won't undo any of it.

But that's not the point.

ARCHIVIST

No-one gets what they deserve. Not in this place. They just get whatever hurts them the most. Even me.

BASIRA

…

Can we move on now?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. I believe we can. This way.

[CLICK]

MAG179 - Accomplice

Statement ########-19

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS CRUNCHING ON GRAVEL, TO A BACKGROUND CHORUS OF INDUSTRIAL FURNACE NOISE]

[DEEP BREATH AS THE STATIC STARTS TO RISE]

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[MACHINERY NOISE, LIKE CONVEYORS AND SCOOPS, AND THE FIERY PROCESSING OF WASTE ACCOMPANIES THE STATEMENT]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

The heat of the furnace curls the hair on Derek's arm. It burns in a way that is as familiar as it is stomach-churning, like the end of a cigarette, or the flush of a childhood face as it tries to block out the noises, the shame of being told to stop lying by the policeman who plays poker with his dad. He tried not to touch the metal parts of his small workspace, as it is hot enough to raise blisters. But

everything is metal here. His spade is metal. His hammer is metal. The tracks are metal that lead the rusted metal carts towards his furnace.

This load is full of children's toys. Not the sad and mouldy wooden ones he threw at his sister as a boy, but bright, colourful plastic that he recognises from his own daughter's birthdays, Christmases… happier times. The sight fills him with dread. Where did they get these? What has happened to Tilly? He wants to run, disappear into the night calling her name, but he remembers what happened the last time he left his post, what the overseer took from him. His shovel digs into the pile of happy memories, and he tosses it into the flames, one gruelling motion after another. The burning plastic fumes hit him, and for a moment he staggers, reaching out a hand to steady himself. His palm sizzles as it comes to rest on the furnace, and he draws it back with a stifled yelp. He knows what happens in this place if you draw attention to yourself by screaming.

His shovel goes back into the pile, and meets an unexpected resistance. Something soft and almost spongy. He knows the texture well, and as he pulls the spade away, the bright blood on it confirms his fears. Another sharp sting of panic washes over him, electric pulses of fear causing his muscles to lock in place for a moment. Then he begins to load the furnace faster, frantically hurling away anything blocking the view of the body, desperately hoping to see –

It's not her. It's someone else. Derek doesn't know the man who lies

in the cart, lifeless eyes staring at him from a head split in two by a careless shovel-blow. He pauses for a moment, then goes to his task, hacking up the corpse, and loading it into the hungry flames. The smell hits him, sickening him as it always does, tinged with that cloying, greasy nostalgia.

'I got you.' That's what Colin had always said to him when they were kids. And he had always meant it. When Derek needed somewhere to stay when his dad was on the warpath. 'I got you.' When Derek needed a little something to take the edge off. 'I got you.' When the lifeless body of Derek's father lay at the bottom of the stairs, limbs folded around the cricket bat he had hit him with. 'I got you.'

And Colin was right. He had.

Words can't really express the gratitude Derek felt as the body disappeared into the furnace of the junkyard where his friend, Colin, worked. No, friend wasn't a strong enough word. They were family in that moment. And they would always have each other's backs. When the police came hassling them, he had Colin's back. When some little dipshit didn't show the proper respect, he had Colin's back. When Colin needed someone by his side for a smash and grab, Derek had his back. And when one of them had to go down for three years… well, it seemed only fair.

The rumble of wheels on old metal rails brings Derek back to himself as he sees the now-empty, bloodstained cart rolling back and away from him. Disappearing into the field of red-hot glowing

metal. Another one would be coming soon, rolling inevitably towards him. What part of his life would he have to burn then? What thing he loved would he have to hurl into the flames? The apprehension is as familiar to him as the scent of burning hair. He knows what it means to wait, and see what he has lost.

The first time he got out, he had lost his job and his home. The second time he got out, he had lost his daughter. The third time, he had lost the ability to walk the streets without being hounded by some bored cop, turning out his pockets, desperate for him to throw a punch. But it changed nothing. He always had Colin's back.

Something is coming. Derek can feel it. It's not the next cart, he knows *that* sound. It's quicker, more vicious. Panting, snarling, bloody feet speeding quietly over through the heat of the yard. A hatred, a deep, self-righteous loathing charging before him.

[ANIMAL SNARLING, FOLLOWED BY RENDING VIOLENCE]

It is the sharp end of the violence that has wanted him all his life, and Derek has less than a second to recognise her face before she begins to tear him apart.

Another victim. Another hunt.

The pain and terror courses through him.

Derek is still aware as she toys with him, pulls bits from his torso, and chews them with a hundred sharpened teeth. He is aware –

though not, perhaps, alive.

[STATIC RISES AND FADES]

[FOOTSTEPS ON GRAVEL]

BASIRA

She's here, then?

ARCHIVIST

[Surprised] Basira? I… I-I didn't hear you, uh…

BASIRA

No. I figured you wouldn't when you were… busy.

ARCHIVIST

I thought you were keeping watch.

BASIRA

I was. *Watched* you sneak away.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry.

BASIRA

You apologise too much.

ARCHIVIST

[Chuckling] Martin says the same thing.

BASIRA

[Chuckling] Like he's any better.

…

Why didn't you want me to hear this one?

ARCHIVIST

What?

BASIRA

You weren't this cagey about the other ones, meaning you wanted to keep this one secret.

ARCHIVIST

Uhh… Hm.

BASIRA

Because this one was Daisy's victim?

ARCHIVIST

…

Yes.

BASIRA

…

Didn't think you knew what the statement was going to be before it happened?

ARCHIVIST

I just had a sense of it.

BASIRA

So… what? You thought I'd hear he was a murderer, and I'd agree with her? Maybe I'd figure she was doing the apocalypse a *favour* by taking him out?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know what I thought.

BASIRA

Sure.

ARCHIVIST

I don't know, alright! I was… I was worried that if you listened, it might feel like an accusation. After everything we've already talked about, I-I mean… What good would it do for you to hear? What's in this one that you don't already know? "People have their reasons for doing wrong?" "The system hurts everyone?"

Just seemed kind of pointless.

BASIRA

Yeah. I guess.

ARCHIVIST

Honestly, I just wanted to avoid this conversation.

BASIRA

Should've been sneakier, then.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

…

Never been my strong suit, has it?

BASIRA

How many times have you been kidnapped at this point?

ARCHIVIST

That depends if you –

BASIRA

…

Say it.

ARCHIVIST

Depends if you count Daisy.

[TENSION & BREATHING]

So… You did hear it, then?

BASIRA

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

What, uh… What did you think? Did it… help?

BASIRA

With what?

ARCHIVIST

I don’t know.

BASIRA

…

Me, neither.

[RUNNING FOOTSTEPS ON GRAVEL]

MARTIN

[Slightly breathless] Hey, she's – she's, she's here!

BASIRA

What? Now?

MARTIN

Yeah, yeah, she… she just tore into a guy!

[Shaken] It was… He was, um…

ARCHIVIST

Yes, we understand, Martin.

BASIRA

You didn't think this was worth mentioning!?

ARCHIVIST

I didn't notice. I was talking to you!

BASIRA

Fine, whatever. Let's go.

[SOUND OF FRUSTRATED MARTIN]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[FAINT ROAR OF FURNACE FLAMES; ANIMAL SOUNDS OF CHEWING & CRACKING BONE]

[TENSE MOMENTS AS BASIRA TAKES AIM]

ARCHIVIST

[Hushed] Is this a good enough angle? We can try and sneak round to the other side of the furnaces, but then the smoke wouldn't cover us –

BASIRA

It's fine. Shut up. I just need to focus.

ARCHIVIST

Alright.

[MEAT SOUNDS, AS DAISY REMOVES A LIMB; DISTRESSED MARTIN SOUND]

Take your time…

BASIRA

I will do as soon as you… Shut. Up.

[MORE AIMING. MARTIN GASPS, A WOODEN POLE FALLS

OVER]

[DAISY PAUSES, SNIFFS THE AIR, THEN RESUMES CONSUMPTION]

[Hushed, angry] The hell was that!?

MARTIN

Sorry! Sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!

ARCHIVIST

What happened?

MARTIN

I-I thought you were about to fire.

BASIRA

So you gasped, just in case?

MARTIN

Look, it's a tense situation, alright? I don't know what I'm doing here. I'm not a sniper –

BASIRA

Goddamnit.

ARCHIVIST

Basira, are you sure you're up to this? It doesn't need to be right now. W-We can always back off, regroup, wait for a better situation. One where she isn't… elbow deep in some poor sod's corpse.

BASIRA

Don't do that.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry.

MARTIN

What am I missing here?

BASIRA

He knows as well as I do that the **only** reason we're even able to get this close is because she's busy with a kill. There isn't going to **be** a better opportunity.

MARTIN

Now or never, then.

BASIRA

Yeah.

I made her a promise.

ARCHIVIST

You need to be certain.

BASIRA

I **am**.

[BASIRA TAKES AIM AGAIN, HESITATES AGAIN]

Would you stop staring at me like that?

ARCHIVIST

Like *what*?

BASIRA

Like you've looked inside my head, and you don't like what you see.

ARCHIVIST

If that's an accusation, then you're wrong. I don't do that.

[FEASTING SOUNDS STOP]

BASIRA

Right. Like you're suddenly given infinite power and no consequences, and *that's* when you decide to start respecting people's privacy.

ARCHIVIST

Is that really so hard to believe?

MARTIN (BACKGROUND)

Uh…

BASIRA

Yeah, John. It is.

MARTIN (BACKGROUND)

Guys, guys…

BASIRA

If you have something you want to say, god-boy, just say it.

MARTIN (BACKGROUND)

Guys…

ARCHIVIST

Look. I know it's hard and you have your reasons, but it is not *my* fault that you can't bring yourself –

MARTIN

[Exasperated, hushed] Shut up! Both of you!

BASIRA

What?

MARTIN

She's *gone*.

ARCHIVIST

Wait, what? Oh. Oh no.

BASIRA

Get down!

[DAISY LEAPS WITH A GROWL]

[PHYSICAL STRUGGLE ENSUES BETWEEN DAISY & THE ARCHIVIST, GROWLING THROUGHOUT]

ARCHIVIST

Daisy, no!

BASIRA

Out the way!

MARTIN

Let him go!

BASIRA

Get out the way!

ARCHIVIST

Take the shot!

MARTIN

No, you'll hit John!

ARCHIVIST

Take the shot, Basira!

BASIRA

…

Uh…

ARCHIVIST

Basira! Do it!

MARTIN

Don't!

BASIRA

I can't…

[TEETH CONTACT FLESH, BONE CRUNCHES, THE ARCHIVIST IS IN PAIN]

Daisy! Stop! Please.

[THE ARCHIVIST WHIMPERS]

[DAISY'S SPEECH IS LOW AND GUTTURAL, EXPRESSED WITH DIFFICULTY THROUGH A JAW UNFAMILIAR TO HUMAN WORDS – SOME CONSONANTS ELONGATED, SOME VOWELS SLURRED]

DAISY

[Around a mouthful of Archivist] Basira?

BASIRA

Oh god. Daisy…

ARCHIVIST

Daisy. Please let me go.

[INCREASED GROWLING AND PAINED SOUNDS]

Ah… Or not. Or not.

MARTIN

Basira…

BASIRA

I know.

MARTIN

But John –

BASIRA

I know! Just give me a second…

DAISY

Basira.

BASIRA

She knows who I am! She recognises me!

MARTIN

B-Basira!

BASIRA

Daisy, come back to us. You can come back. Please.

DAISY

Basira… C-come. Come on…

BASIRA

What?

DAISY

Come. Got to get them.

BASIRA

I… Sure. Just… let him go.

[LOW SNARL FROM DAISY, THEN RELEASE. THE ARCHIVIST COLLAPSES WITH A GRUNT]

MARTIN

Oh John! Oh shit. Shit, shit, shit. Okay, okay, okay, I've got you. I've got you.

[MARTIN BEGINS FIRST AID]

ARCHIVIST

Argh!

MARTIN

I'm sorry! Sorry! Sorry! You j– You need to keep pressure on that leg while I-I sort this…

BASIRA

Daisy, please.

John, can you… Can you do anything?

DAISY

Basira…

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry. I told you. She's too… too deep. I can't do anything, not without killing her.

BASIRA

[Pleadingly] Daisy. It's me. Come on, please…

DAISY

Partner. C-Come.

BASIRA

…

[FAINT RISE OF STATIC]

Oh. I see.

MARTIN

What?

BASIRA

She… she wants me to join her. In the Hunt.

MARTIN

What? Could… Is that even possible?

BASIRA

Yes.

I can feel it. In the blood.

ARCHIVIST

[Weakly] Basira…

[FOOTSTEPS]

BASIRA

I can't leave her like this. She's always had my back. Always.

MARTIN

Basira don't, please…

BASIRA

…

DAISY

Partner… Come…

[MORE FOOTSTEPS]

BASIRA

Not now. Not after everything.

DAISY

[Impatient] Basira! Now!

BASIRA

I… can't.

DAISY

Basira!

[GUNSHOT]

[SNARLING]

[TWO MORE GUNSHOTS]

[DAISY COLLAPSES, DEAD]

[THE DISTANT RUMBLE OF MACHINERY CONTINUES]

[THERE IS NOTHING TO SAY FOR A WHILE]

MARTIN

Basira, I –

BASIRA

Shut up.

MARTIN

I'm sorry. I know –

BASIRA

[Dangerously] Shut. Up.

[FOOTSTEPS MOVING OFF]

MARTIN

No, Basira, wait! J-John's leg… Basira!

ARCHIVIST

[Emphatically] Let her go.

MARTIN

…

ARCHIVIST

Is it… Is it awful that I wish she'd recognised me?

MARTIN

Daisy?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. I mean, she was… We were friends there, sort of, near the end. We went through so much and it just… I wish I could have actually said goodbye.

MARTIN

Would it have made you feel any better about any of it?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know. Maybe? It's hard to know how I feel about anything these days.

MARTIN

…

We said our goodbyes to Daisy after the institute. This was just… This was just dealing with all the stuff she left behind.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose.

[A BAG IS UNZIPPED]

MARTIN

Come on, I need to patch that leg up properly. The last thing we need is a limp slowing us down.

[WINCING FROM THE ARCHIVIST]

Of course, that's assuming the bandages haven't transformed into snakes or something.

ARCHIVIST

[Distracted] Hmm? No. No, they're fine.

MARTIN

I'd forgotten we had them, to be honest. I packed them before I realised what a celebrity you were out here. I was starting to think I'd never need them. I'm surprised she could hurt you at all.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, that came as a bit of a shock to me as well, actually.

MARTIN

You didn't know?

ARCHIVIST

I didn't think to check. Just, sort of, assumed it was safe.

MARTIN

That's a pretty big assumption, John.

ARCHIVIST

Hmmm. Apparently. I mean, I know it sounds strange, but it… it felt right for Daisy to be able to hurt me.

MARTIN

Dream logic again?

ARCHIVIST

Mmm. The… resonances from our relationship before the change carried over and –

[PAINED SOUNDS]

MARTIN

Hold still.

[RETURNING FOOTSTEPS]

MARTIN

How’re you doing?

BASIRA

[Weary] How do you think?

MARTIN

Sure.

BASIRA

I’m going to stay here. Burn the body.

ARCHIVIST

Of course. We can wait. I still need to, uh…

BASIRA

No. You go on. I'll make my own way to London.

MARTIN

What? No, don't be daft, it's not a problem for us to wait while you deal with this.

BASIRA

Please. Just go.

…

MARTIN

Wait, seriously?

ARCHIVIST

Basira, if you travel on your own, if you're not with us… I can't guarantee your safety.

BASIRA

Good.

MARTIN

Basira, getting yourself hurt isn't going to help anyone.

BASIRA

It's just… something I have to do.

You said follow the tower, right?

ARCHIVIST

Right.

MARTIN

No, no, this is ridiculous. You could die.

BASIRA

I'll do my best not to.

MARTIN

This isn't a joke, Basira!

ARCHIVIST

Martin, this is what she needs.

MARTIN

No, no! It's… it's completely –

BASIRA

It'll… It'll help me. All going well, I'll meet you both in London.

He'll know where to find me.

ARCHIVIST

So you won't mind if I check up on you sometimes?

BASIRA

If you must. But don't overdo it. I *don't* like being watched.

ARCHIVIST

Understood.

Come on then, Martin.

MARTIN

What? So that's it? We just head off, and hope you make it?

BASIRA

Yeah.

MARTIN

Why don't we rest on it? Hmm? I know we all need a moment, and John can barely stand –

ARCHIVIST

Honestly, I'm starting to feel better already.

[THE ARCHIVIST STANDS]

I just need to stretch it out a bit.

[THE ARCHIVIST STRETCHES]

MARTIN

We're not doing this.

BASIRA

[softly] Martin. Please.

MARTIN

…

You'd better look after yourself.

BASIRA

I will.

ARCHIVIST

[Gently] Come on.

[FOOTSTEPS AS THEY MOVE OFF]

For what it's worth… I'm sorry it had to work out like this.

BASIRA

I'm not.

[CLICK]

MAG180 – Moving On

Statement ########–20

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS CRUNCHING ON GRAVEL, AS THE WIND WHISTLES]

MARTIN

Hey, hang on!

ARCHIVIST

Oh, right you are.

MARTIN

Sorry, I just don't want to lose sight of you. You keep disappearing behind tombs and that.

ARCHIVIST

I'll try to slow down.

MARTIN

Thank you. I really rather not end up lost in a… what did you call it?

ARCHIVIST

Necropolis. It's like a cemetery but all the tombs are above ground. New Orleans has a very impressive one. Or… had.

MARTIN

Hmm.

ARCHIVIST

It's usually for places where the ground floods often or is too swampy for burial.

MARTIN

[Sarcastically] Pffft, oh yeah, yeah, I'm sure this place is just here because of all the flooding swamps.

ARCHIVIST

No, obviously. *This* place is a manifestation of –

MARTIN

No. Nope.

ARCHIVIST

I understand. Of course.

MARTIN

Sorry, I've just… I've been hearing altogether too many of your

statements lately, and yeah –

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. No, no, I… I get it.

MARTIN

Just a little break.

ARCHIVIST

That's fair enough.

MARTIN

In fact, this time, when you start to… intone, I'm going to find a nice soundproof mausoleum, and just, just chill with whatever horrors they've got lurking in there. Y'know. Maybe play a bit of I Spy or something.

[THE ARCHIVIST CHUCKLES]

MARTIN

I-I'll start. I spy with my little eye, something beginning with… T–

ARCHIVIST

Tombs.

MARTIN

Cheater.

ARCHIVIST

[Indignant] I did not!

MARTIN

Your turn.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. I spy with my little eye… Literally everything.

[MARTIN LAUGHS]

[THE ARCHIVIST LAUGHS]

[A NEARBY TOMB LAUGHS]

[LAUGHTER STOPS WITH TENSE SIGHS]

MARTIN

Right.

Sorry.

Forgot. Levity is just… off the cards.

[ARCHIVIST NOISE OF AGREEMENT]

ARCHIVIST

How are you doing? About…

MARTIN

Yeah, yeah… Yeah. I'm… I don't know. I'm not sure how to feel. Just… pressing on, you know?

ARCHIVIST

I do.

MARTIN

…

Do you think she'll be okay without us?

ARCHIVIST

She's made it this far.

MARTIN

Yeah.

I just worry.

ARCHIVIST

Me too. But I'm, uh, keeping an eye on her, so…

[HEAVY STONE SCRAPES AS A SARCOPHAGUS THUDS OPENS]

MARTIN

Is that…?

ARCHIVIST

It's not for us. Let's keep moving.

MARTIN

Yeah, alright, come –

Hey. Hey! I said slow down.

ARCHIVIST

S-Sorry.

MARTIN

How exactly does a leg wound make you *faster*?

ARCHIVIST

I just want to get through here quickly.

MARTIN

Really? I mean, it seems pretty calm apart from… Wait. Wait, wait. No, no, no, no, no, no. It's not more children, is it?

ARCHIVIST

No, no. The necropolis is fine. Uh, I mean, well, obviously it's, it's

bad, i-i-it's horrible…

MARTIN

S-So why the hurry? Where are we going?

ARCHIVIST

Er… well…

MARTIN

Come on, don't play coy.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not being coy, it's just, well…

MARTIN

Wait. Wait… are you excited?

ARCHIVIST

A bit. Maybe.

MARTIN

[Suspicious] Why? What's next?

ARCHIVIST

[Excited] I don't know.

MARTIN

In what way?

ARCHIVIST

All the ways. I don't know what's next.

MARTIN

What? But, like, you, you can see "literally everything," so –

ARCHIVIST

I-I can! But it's a blind spot! No idea why. I-I didn't realise until we got closer, and I was looking at our route, but… I can't see the area after the necropolis. None of it. It's like the inside of the Panopticon, or, or wherever Georgie and Melanie are hiding.

MARTIN

Or Annabelle.

ARCHIVIST

…Or Annabelle.

MARTIN

You think the others might be there?

ARCHIVIST

[Delighted] I have no idea. It's a mystery!

MARTIN

Just so you know, this… this is an adorable look on you.

ARCHIVIST

[Impatient] Yes, yes, yes, yes…

MARTIN

[Humouring] Alright, then. Lead on Scooby, let's go solve a mystery, ooooh…

ARCHIVIST

Actually, no, hold on.

MARTIN

[Sighing] Of course.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry to be a burden.

MARTIN

Fine, fine. Just… stay in this… avenue while you do it. Don't want to lose sight of you.

ARCHIVIST

Of course.

MARTIN

Not when there's a mystery on the loose, oooh…

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

[FOOTSTEPS AS MARTIN BACKS OFF, AND THE STATIC RISES]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Away and around and away they stretch. Row upon row of waiting granite and watching marble. The names are carved with steady-handed reverence, and the dates do not make sense, but… bite your tongue. Read the epitaphs quietly to yourself in a respectful, solemn whisper: 'loving son', 'noted philanthropist', 'honoured hero', and do not question them out loud. For these graves, they are not silent – they are listening.

Stop a moment, and see the stone angels perched above you, staring down from the harsh corners of each mausoleum roof, looking out over the avenues of darkened, not-quite-moonlit, paving slabs, which buckle ever so slightly every step, as though the soil beneath is damp and yielding. Hungry. The angels have no expressions, their faces worn and pockmarked from the cold and vicious rain that finds the time to fall with disinterested cruelty at times upon their post. But the swords that each one carries do not wear, nor rust, nor blunt. They keep their eager vigil, desperate for a comment, a word, a breath out of place against which they might strike. Upon each blade the words stand out in stark and silvered letters: NIHIL NISI

BONUM.

[FAINT FOOTSTEPS HURRY]

Walk faster now, pick up the pace, for not all the tombs are silent, not all the graves are at peace. Is that a voice, calling sweetly from beyond the iron gate, telling you that it has something to show you, secrets that it wishes to share?

[FAINT SOUNDS OF SONE SCRAPING]

Just knock and ask to enter. Or try your best not to hear, to think nothing but good and admirable thoughts of those who wait in monuments to their own virtue. There now, a face, pale and stained with age and death and sin, no, not sin, never sin. Misjudgement. Indiscretion. Misunderstanding. Never sin. Never evil. It grins and smiles and nods its head, with broken yellow teeth. It is a smile that wants you closer, wants you near. A bloated, purple tongue that tries to whisper reassurance, but can only gurgle promises that smell like sour fruit.

[GRAVEYARD SOUNDS AS THE WIND GUSTS, CHAINS CLINK, WOOD CREAKS]

How big is this place? How many miles of eerie edifice stand between you and freedom? Some doors lie cracked, shattered outwards, their occupants kept in check by ancient chains binding their brittle, bony limbs. Don’t go too close – keep to the middle of

the narrowing alley. The stench that rolls from these broken crypts is unlike anything you have ever known, like lakes of fly-blown blood left to bake in the unrelenting sun. Keep it to yourself, though. Don't mention it. No point making a scene. The angels wouldn't like it. Besides, those are the tombs with the longest epitaphs, so they must have been good people.

Watch for the stones, the ones beneath your feet that sink and shift on the swampy ground. With every step their firmness seems more and more a question, and the cracks that cut across them grow deeper and deeper. Don't step on the cracks, or goodness knows what will happen. And you are surrounded by goodness, are you not?

Your steps are as quick as respect will allow, and echo dutifully down the avenues. How much further to the gates? How much longer must you watch your every thought, lest it bring a sneer to your lips the angels might take as scorn. It must be close, simply turn at the next crypt and you should see it.

[DISTANT SOUND OF A CROWD MURMURING]

Wait. No. That isn't right. There should be the gates, the threshold to leave these silent rows, but instead what rises in front of you is a house, tall and angular, with jagged peaks of darked wood, and windows from which no light escapes. It calls itself a home, but it lies. The funeral home houses only the passing congregations of sycophants and weepers, desperate to cleanse their own iniquities in

the salt-tinged flood of gloating tears. You turn to walk away, to hurry back and disappear into the tombs that now seem almost welcoming, when behind you comes the inescapable, the inevitable sound of an old wooden door being opened.

[DOOR CREAKS OPEN]

‘Come in,’ the Funeral Director intones, ‘The service is about to begin. You are expected.’

The faceless gaze of each sepulchre angel fixes itself upon you, and you feel yourself turning back towards the house, though every muscle in your body screams at you to run. Instead you nod, and apologise for your lateness. The angels look away. And you step across the threshold.

The air smells of decay and lavender and something else you can’t quite place. The dust has settled over everything in layers so thick you dread to touch anything, to rest for even a moment, so keenly aware of the stark imprint you would leave, the marks of your presence, so deep and clear. A sign of life amongst the judgemental dead.

The Funeral Director does not comment upon your reluctance or care, though you know that nothing escapes his eyes. He leads you through the winding house towards the memorial room, the thick carpet crunching under your feet so loudly that it makes you wince, certain that it calls all attention to you. The Director’s steps are silent and dignified, the heavy fabric of his dark suit still and crisp

as cold iron.

The mourners are all lined up so very, very neatly, four chairs either side, twenty rows deep. Each and every one in pitch-black funeral best, grey-haired heads bowed in respect, and a steady river of restrained tears flowing gracefully from under lace veils. There is no ragged breathing, no agonised wails of deep and wounding grief, only the respectful stillness of those who have lost a great figure, the best of them.

At the end of the room is the coffin, polished to a dreadful shine. There is no picture, no photograph of a smiling face casting beatitudes from beyond the grave. But the coffin is open, and from inside you can see the faintest hint of its occupant.

No. It can't be her. That's not right. It's not fair. One hundred and sixty pairs of misty eyes follow your slow procession down the room, bile rising higher and higher with each row you pass. Fifteen left, you can make out her hair, still the cold grey you remember so vividly. Ten rows left, and you can see her mouth, those lips that hide the grin that now flashes thorough your memory. Five more, and you can see her eyes. Why are her eyes open? They are lustreless and clouded, but still contain the cruelty you saw when she held the knife.

Now you stand over her. There is no mistaking who it is that lies within that softly padded box. Beneath your threadbare suit and fear-stained shirt, the scars that lattice across your body ache and burn at the sight of the one who gave them to you. You feel the

cross she once carved into your back open, and begin to weep its own bloody testament.

You need to leave, to turn and flee and find the end to this necropolis of polite denials and vicious civility. Your vision swims as you turn from the face of death, and find your arm grasped by the Funeral Director. His hand moves and you move with it, unable to stand against the unyielding strength of his simplest gesture. He places you behind the podium, as the mourners stare at you, and you realise with a stab of agonised dread that they are waiting for your eulogy, their faces alight with hungry grief.

'If you would like to say a few words…,' the Director commands.

You want to scream at them, curse them all for hypocrites. How can they not smell the blood she spilled? The path of scars and pain she left behind her every minute of her life? She was a monster, brutal and unrepentant.

'She was…,' you begin, a heavy pause before your voice betrays you. 'The most kind and loving person I ever had the wonderful fortune to meet. Each life she touched was left brighter and more beautiful for her presence. She was… an angel.'

The tears are flowing freely now, as your eulogy continues. You cannot turn from the podium, cannot stop the gushing flow of love and forgiveness you vomit out into the nodding crowd. Behind you, a dark shadow moves, a shape that seems to slither from the coffin. You watch it coming closer from the corner of your eye, but you

cannot stop your kind words. Not even as the needle-sharp teeth of her corpse begin to dig into your shoulder.

[GROANING, THEN THE SOUND OF FLESH TEARING]

[STATIC RISES AS THE ARCHIVIST EXHALES]

ARCHIVIST

Right, then. I'm done. Let's see what we've got.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[THE WIND CONTINUES TO WHIRL]

MARTIN

Is that…

ARCHIVIST

[Pleased] Looks like it.

MARTIN

No, no…

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

It… can't be real?

ARCHIVIST

And yet!

MARTIN

But, but it's… it's…

ARCHIVIST

Yup!

MARTIN

It – It's like something out of a National Trust brochure.

ARCHIVIST

I'm pretty sure it is National Trust. Was, anyway.

MARTIN

But you don't know for sure?

ARCHIVIST

No. I can't see anything about it. If I had to guess… Upton House,

maybe? I mean, country houses and stately homes not exactly my specialist subjects.

MARTIN

But it's… it's fine. It's better than fine. T-There are trees. Look! Like, real trees!

ARCHIVIST

It's beautiful.

MARTIN

It's a trap.

ARCHIVIST

[Still delighted] No! It *might* be a trap. We just don't know!

MARTIN

John…

…

ARCHIVIST

[Resigned] Yeah, we'll go around.

MARTIN

No… *[Sigh]* No, no, no. Let's, let's check it out. I mean, obviously it can't be how it seems but… well…

ARCHIVIST

What if it is?

MARTIN

Exactly.

ARCHIVIST

A beautiful oasis, untouched by the end of the world.

MARTIN

It’s got to be worth a shot, right?

[BIRDS TWITTER]

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

MARTIN

Don’t fret it. It’s just nice to see you like this.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[BIRDSOUND CONTINUES, CLEARER NOW]

MARTIN

So what now? I don't see a doorbell.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not even sure this door actually opens.

MARTIN

But it should, it's the front door! Besides, it's the biggest one so if it's not –

ARCHIVIST

Maybe they expect you to come in through the café or, I mean, they usually have a little gift shop or something.

MARTIN

Okay, so where would they be?

ARCHIVIST

No idea.

MARTIN

I thought you said you'd been here before.

ARCHIVIST

I said I might have been, and even if I have, I was twelve.

MARTIN

I'll tell you what, it is more convenient when you know everything.

[SOUNDS OF A DOOR UNLOCKING]

ARCHIVIST

[Pleased] Oh! Guess I was wrong.

MARTIN

Get ready.

ARCHIVIST

To do what?

MARTIN

What do you mean "What"? Smite them. If we need to.

Wait, hang on, can you even smite people here?

ARCHIVIST

I-I don't think so.

[DOOR OPENS, MUSIC CAN BE HEARD PLAYING]

MARTIN

Oh. Oh no… ah…

[FOOTSTEPS]

ANNABELLE

Good morning.

MARTIN

…

Uh… Yes.

ANNABELLE

Come on in. He's waiting for you.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. And who exactly –

MARTIN

J-J-John… John…

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

I think… um… Annabelle? Annabelle Cane?

ANNABELLE

Come on. He's very excited, you know.

[FOOTSTEPS AS SHE TURNS TO LEAVE]

MARTIN

So, do we follow or…?

ARCHIVIST

I… I suppose.

[THEY FOLLOW, DOOR CREAKING AS THEY CLOSE IT, FOOTSTEPS ECHOING AS THEY GO]

ARCHIVIST

So… Annabelle, what are you playing at? What are you doing here?

ANNABELLE

I really wouldn't worry about that. I'm just helping out around the place a little bit. Making myself at home. You know how it is.

MARTIN

John, I don't like this.

ANNABELLE

You can relax, Mr. Blackwood. You're safe here.

MARTIN

I don't feel it.

ANNABELLE

Not something I can help, I'm afraid.

MARTIN

Though… John, do you feel, huh, do you feel hungry?

ARCHIVIST

I, um… Actually, I was going to say I'm feeling… really tired.

ANNABELLE

Not surprising. When's the last time you slept?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know. I mean weeks ago. Months maybe.

ANNABELLE

Well, there you go, then.

Just in here.

[CLASSICAL PIANO MUSIC HAS BEEN GETTING LOUDER AS THEY APPROACH THE PARLOUR]

[ANNABELLE OPENS THE DOOR]

Your guests are here, Mikaele.

[PIANO CEASES]

SALESA

Hoo-hoo-hoo! Excellent! Come in, come in! Ah, a pleasure to meet both of you. Thank you Annabelle.

ANNABELLE

You're quite welcome. Have fun.

ARCHIVIST

[Extremely tired] Sorry, Mikaele… Salesa?

SALESA

The one and only. I must say I've been, uh…

[THE ARCHIVIST AND MARTIN COLLAPSE WITH A SMALL SNORE, FAST ASLEEP]

ANNABELLE

I did say this might happen.

SALESA

You did, you did. Well. So much for my big reveal.

Shame. Ah, well, we can talk after they've slept, I suppose. Eugh. And had a bath. And some food. No rush. We have all the time in the world.

[SOUNDS OF CROCKERY MOVING]

[CLICK]

MAG181 – Ignorance

Statement ########–21

[CLICK]

[CLASSICAL MUSIC IS PLAYING. SOUNDS OF CROCKERY AND LIQUID BEING POURED.]

SALESA

Hmmm. Interesting…

[THREE KNOCKS ON A WOODEN DOOR]

Ah, of course! Come in, come in!

[DOOR OPENS]

MARTIN

Er… Mr… Salesa?

SALESA

Mikaele, please! Come in. Did you sleep well? Have you had something to eat? Annabelle said she'd shown you the pantry.

[SALESA CEASES THE MUSIC]

ARCHIVIST

[Uncomfortable] I…er… We slept. I-I don't know – H-How long's it been?

SALESA

About seventy-one hours, by my clock. How're you feeling?

ARCHIVIST

Disorientated. It's like, um, like I've lost my sight or, or –

SALESA

Well, you have, haven't you?

[HE CHUCKLES. IT ISN'T THE FRIENDLIEST SOUND]

Annabelle tells me you work for The Eye.

ARCHIVIST

Well… I-I w-wouldn't exactly say I-I 'work for' it.

MARTIN

Well… I-I-I mean, you say *that*, but when you stop to think about it, it was *literally* our employer, John, so…

ARCHIVIST

I-I suppose.

SALESA

[Friendly chuckles] I like this one. Come on, sit down, have a drink.

[CLINKING SOUNDS OF GLASS AND ICE]

MARTIN

You're sure? What time is it? Oh. Huh. I can actually ask that question here.

SALESA

You can indeed.

MARTIN

And the sun's high, so…

SALESA

Good eye… Martin, was it?

MARTIN

Er, er… Yes.

SALESA

Well Martin. It's about ten in the morning. More or less.

MARTIN

And you're drinking?

SALESA

Of course! Even in my little bubble of peace, I find drinking after dark leads to some rather morbid thoughts.

MARTIN

Right.

ARCHIVIST

What is… this place?

SALESA

I just told you, it's my little bubble. My silver lining on an otherwise cloudy day.

ARCHIVIST

That's not–

SALESA

Now tell me, do you know why there's a tape recorder here? I noticed it just now, but I don't believe I actually own one.

ARCHIVIST

Uh… Not really.

MARTIN

They sort of just … follow us round.

SALESA

Hmmmm. Interesting. Did you carry it in? Things shouldn't be able to manifest in here like that.

ARCHIVIST

You had one in your… bag, I-I think, Martin? Did, did you drop it here?

MARTIN

Er, I don't think so.

SALESA

Very well. In that case, we shall leave it to be. It's hardly valuable, and it's probably best not to upset whatever it might be involved with. Besides, I have no secrets to hide.

ARCHIVIST

So… you wouldn't mind answering a few questions?

SALESA

…

I am an open book.

MARTIN

[Scoffs] In my experience, open books can actually be pretty dangerous.

SALESA

Ha! I do like this one! Now you mention it, you actually remind me of Jurgen a bit. In his younger days of course. You're sure you won't have a drink? We definitely had some tea around here somewhere?

MARTIN

Er, I, I already had some, thank you. Some of *us* know how to be polite guests.

ARCHIVIST

[Sharply] I don't intend to accept anything offered by Annabelle Cane.

SALESA

Oh, you know Annabelle?

ARCHIVIST

Sort of. You do know she's part of The Web?

SALESA

[Sarcastically] No, I assumed the thread holding her head together was due to a childhood knitting accident.

[CHUCKLES]

Of course I know she's with The Web.

ARCHIVIST

And that doesn't bother you?

SALESA

Not especially. And even if it did, what good would it do?

MARTIN

So what's the deal with you two anyway?

SALESA

It's an odd situation, but not a complicated one. Shortly after I decided to stay here, she arrived. Wandered in from the chaos out there, and told me she was going to stay with me. I didn't get this far by pitting myself against The Web, so I welcomed her in.

ARCHIVIST

And…?

SALESA

And sometimes she cooks.

ARCHIVIST

She ‘cooks’?

SALESA

I don’t know what you want me to say. It’s a big house and I don’t see her much. Can’t even say which corner she’s made her nest in. Whatever she’s doing, all I can do is hope it doesn’t wreck my little oasis. And if it does, then I hope that by keeping her in good graces she’ll at least do me the courtesy of killing me first.

…

Anyway, let us talk of happier things. Or perhaps just take a moment to enjoy not being out there. You are, of course, welcome to stay as long as you like.

MARTIN

Th-That’s very generous.

ARCHIVIST

What is this place? How did you find it?

SALESA

[Slightly curt] I didn’t *find* anything. I made it.

ARCHIVIST

[Compellingly] Tell me what happened.

SALESA

No.

ARCHIVIST

I – uh… W-What?

[DEEP CHUCKLES FROM SALESA]

SALESA

The look on your face! Look, he's so confused!

[MARTIN LAUGHS A BIT TOO]

ARCHIVIST

Martin!

MARTIN

Sorry. Sorry. Y-You did look kind of funny. It was l-l-l-like you were flunking an exam or something.

[MORE CHUCKLING FROM SALESA]

SALESA

Yes! Exactly that! Your powers won't work here, Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London. The Eye can't see this place.

ARCHIVIST

So, what now?

SALESA

Ah, no need for the suspicion, I'm not going to hurt you. You're quite safe. I'll tell you soon enough. Like I said, I have no secrets. But it will be in my own time.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

SALESA

You know, Gertrude once used that little trick to ask if I was trying to sell her a forgery. Admittedly I was, so I don't hold a grudge, but I didn't much care for the experience. Anyway, for now, just relax, and no doubt I'll get there eventually. I haven't had anyone to talk to properly in months.

MARTIN

I thought… what about Annabelle?

SALESA

She keeps mostly to herself, and when she does talk, it's usually more of the sinister monologue variety, or cryptically telling me I've got 'guests'.

MARTIN

Er, yeah, that sounds familiar.

ARCHIVIST

I'm trying to be less cryptic.

MARTIN

I-I know, I know.

SALESA

So what's it like out there? I assume the Archivist must be rather a powerful position, since you seem to be travelling through it pretty freely.

ARCHIVIST

It's… uh… um…

MARTIN

John?

ARCHIVIST

Sorry I just, er… Hmm.

MARTIN

I-It's bad. Really bad. It's all carved up between the powers, and everyone has just been, sort of scooped up, and chucked into their

deepest fears. Just nightmare after nightmare after nightmare, and, er…

Why are you smiling?

SALESA

I'm sorry, you're quite right – it's inappropriate. It's simply… I have spent the last decade preparing for this to happen. Not just something like this, but almost exactly this situation. There was every chance, in fact the great likelihood, that I was wasting my time, and throwing away years of my life on a ridiculous precaution. But I was right.

I. Was. Right.

And now here I am, safe, warm and comfortable while out there the whole world screams. I don't mean to sound… a-as if I'm happy that people are suffering –

MARTIN

Good, 'cause it does sound a bit like that.

SALESA

Then I apologise. I'm just not sure I can fully communicate the sense of… of *vindication* that I feel. All those long nights I spent wondering if I was paranoid or overreacting… But no. I am here. And I am safe.

MARTIN

I mean… I guess that makes sense.

SALESA

So what of you two? What… Wh-Where are you going? You seem to be travelling with some purpose.

ARCHIVIST

Did Annabelle not tell you that?

SALESA

She said you were travelling to the Tower. The Panopticon, she called it, whatever that might be. She didn't say what for.

[Suspiciously] Nothing that might cause me trouble, I hope?

MARTIN

We're going to try and end this. Turn the world back.

ARCHIVIST

Martin!

MARTIN

What? Okay. Maybe he can help. We could use some support. And it's, it's not like he wants the world to stay like this either.

SALESA

You are right, to a point. I would welcome a return to the real

world. Ha! To be the only man to weather the greatest disaster in history of reality utterly unharmed. What an achievement that would be, quite the boast. But alas no, I can't help you.

MARTIN

What? Why not?

SALESA

I have nothing to offer. Well, except perhaps for some… basic provisions. I have food, drink, a few luxuries. But none of that would help you out there. And I'm certainly not going to follow you. No, I think the best thing I can do is to welcome you to stay in my sanctuary as long as you wish.

MARTIN

Oh, well, thank you. I think we just might. John?

ARCHIVIST

I can't use my powers here. I-I can't protect us.

MARTIN

Protect us from what?

ARCHIVIST

I-It's going to be difficult to relax with a spider lurking around.

SALESA

It gets easier with practice.

ARCHIVIST

…

Alright, I-I guess we can stay. Just for a bit.

SALESA

Excellent! I haven't had guests since the world ended!

ARCHIVIST

[flat] Lovely.

SALESA

Oh, saying that, I suppose there was that insect thing that stumbled in here a month or so back…

MARTIN

Er, insect thing?

SALESA

Some creature of the Crawling Rot. Anyway, it didn't actually make it into the house before Annabelle managed to get rid of it, so I refuse to count it as a guest.

MARTIN

Mmm.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose that makes sense.

SALESA

Of course, I can't actually stop things crossing the border into my hideaway, as *you* both discovered. Another reason I'm content to leave Annabelle to whatever schemes she might be weaving.

ARCHIVIST

How big is your safe zone? Is it, is it always the same size? How did this happen?

SALESA

[Chuckling] Look at him. Not three days without his master spooning knowledge into his head, and he can't bear it! I thought ignorance was meant to be bliss.

[SOUND OF A FRUSTRATED ARCHIVIST]

MARTIN

F-F-For what it's worth, I'd also quite like to know how this all happened.

SALESA

Fine, I'll tell you how it happened. But you must sit quietly while I tell you.

MARTIN

Don't worry, I have had *lots* of practice.

SALESA

And you?

[SOUND OF A DISGRUNTLED ARCHIVIST]

MARTIN

He'll behave.

SALESA (STATEMENT)

My story is not a long one. Not the parts that you care about, at least. The powers, I first learned about from Jurgen Leitner. You're familiar with him? Then I don't need to explain further. When I say I was one of his assistants, you know exactly the kind of education that would be. Terrifying, fascinating, misguided. The man was a genius and an idiot. It didn't take me long to see what he was blind to his whole life: that trying to control the Fears was a good way to get yourself killed, or worse.

I left long before he got what was coming to him, and tried to forget what I knew. I lived my life, and I lived it well, Successful, wealthy, and a little bit feared. Smuggler to the rich and famous. There wasn't an art dealer or curator out there who didn't pretend not to know me. But the trouble is, once you've seen backstage, it's hard

to believe in the show anymore. You understand, I'm sure. You can never quite shake off the desire to have a peek. To see what's waiting in the wings.

When I first stumbled across one of the cursed objects, I recognised what it was immediately. It took the form of a leather pouch, filled with 1888 Morgan silver dollars. It was aligned to The Slaughter and… well, let us call it 'blood money' and talk no more of the grisly details. Selling them, well, it went very badly for the buyer…

But not for me. I walked away unharmed, and with a healthy profit and counted myself lucky. And then it happened again. This time it was a painting: a drab English pastoral that pulled you into The Lonely. Again, I made a lot of money and remained untouched. It's the sort of thing to set a man thinking about his life, you understand?

I began to think hard about the world, about my place within it, and about fear. About the figure of the merchant, the trader who deals in strange and dangerous goods, how it can be found in so many myths and fables, dealing in second-hand nightmares. And how rarely the merchant themself is ever punished in those stories.

I would love to pretend that it was out of self-preservation that I committed to my new trade, but that would be mostly a lie. To tell you the truth, I got a real kick out of playing my role. To think of myself as a purveyor of curses, walking softly through the most dangerous edges of reality so that the rich and arrogant could buy their own doom. Sometimes people would come to me for solutions,

protections or talismans to ward off the attention they had already called down on themselves. I sometimes did what I could to help, but I had to be careful. I could never afford to forget who I actually was working for. And do you know what? I managed to walk that tightrope for decades without falling.

You know, I think there were times when I was perhaps skirting close to The Stranger, but I kept my name prominent and, well… *[chuckles]* I'm not exactly a small personality. Anonymity just wouldn't have suited me.

But the years, they wear on you, and as I talked to more and more people versed in that secret world, more acolytes and would-be cultists about rituals and destinies, I began to come to a conclusion. As the number of people in the world grew, and the amount of fear grew with it, I began to become convinced that it was only a matter of time before one of them succeeded. Before the world was transformed into… Well, you'd know better than me.

So I began to plan for my… retirement. I spent most of my fortune preparing. Some on supplies, but mostly hunting down an artifact that I hoped might give me some… protection. One I had sold right at the start of my career: an old broken camera. One that through some quirk had the ability to hide you from the Powers. It was in the possession of another scared old man, one who had long been running from his own supernatural debts. I believe it operates as a sort of, er, battery, charging itself on all the quiet worries that come from living in hiding, and then when the sanctuary collapses, all that fear flows out at once. No doubt, if my oasis breaks before I

die, The Eye will get quite the feast from me, but in this new world I would hope it has other things to keep itself busy. Anyway, it took a lot of resources to find it again, and even more to retrieve it. Staging my death was a comparative, erm, afterthought – in some ways just a happy accident.

And so I waited, and lived out my days in comfort. For the longest time I thought that, well, maybe I had simply entered normal retirement really dramatically. But then… well… I was right.

I. Was. Right. Both about the world and about the camera. It hid me from The Eye, which, in the new order of reality, also protects where I am from the hellscape all around us. And when I realised that the power moves with the camera… Well, let's just say I loaded up a truckload of supplies, and went on some journeys of my own before I found *this* place.

[MORE CLINKING GLASS AND ICE]

No reason not to live out the apocalypse in style.

[STIRRING NOISES]

In the end, I find myself quite happy. I have supplies for a good few years, and then I plan to take my own life. I think perhaps that's the greatest blessing the camera can bestow. I can die here. Escape this place. Not yet, of course, and maybe the wine will do me in before I have to take matters into my own hands, but still, it remains a

comfort.

Anyway, no more stories, I think. Let us relax, and talk and drink. And not worry about who might be… listening.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[PACKING NOISES]

MARTIN

You're sure we can't stay longer?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. I-I-I've been…um… Er, these last few days I've been getting weaker. Dizzy spells, vagueness. You've seen it.

Being cut off from the Eye… It's not good for me.

MARTIN

Yeah, but if, if you're that connected, that *dependent*, what happens if we actually, y'know, *do* manage to –

ARCHIVIST

We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, I just need us

to be moving on.

[FOOTSTEPS, AND A DOOR CREAKS OPEN]

ANNABELLE

All packed?

ARCHIVIST

Mm.

MARTIN

Oh! Finally showing your face?

ANNABELLE

I'm sure I don't know what you mean.

MARTIN

Pffft. All week you scuttle around with… with food and drinks and all that other stuff, whatever we need, just when we need it, but if we actually try to talk to you, you're gone.

ANNABELLE

[Smilingly] I'm very busy.

ARCHIVIST

Martin, don't bother. We're not going to get any answers out of her.

MARTIN

Y-You're joking right? She's been lurking at the edges of this whole thing since the beginning, and now we can finally actually talk to her, and, what, you're just going to pass? You don't have *any* questions? Nothing at all?

…

John? John!

[MARTIN CLICKS HIS FINGERS IN FRONT OF THE ARCHIVIST]

ARCHIVIST

[Distant] Wha… Oh, yes… sorry.

Look, it's no accident we finally meet face-to-face in the one place I-I **can't** get any answers out of her.

ANNABELLE

[Smug] I'm sure I don't know what you mean.

MARTIN

Why are you here? Hmmm? What's your game?

ANNABELLE

Perhaps I just value my privacy.

MARTIN

Fine, fine. Why did you *call* me before?

ANNABELLE

Perhaps I thought you could use a friendly voice?

MARTIN

Friendly!? You told me John didn't need me!

ANNABELLE

Objectively true. And more importantly, perhaps I thought that you might need a little bit of righteous indignation to help you power through the next steps.

MARTIN

I don't like being manipulated.

ANNABELLE

Then we probably aren't going to be friends.

[SOUND OF FRUSTRATED MARTIN]

For what it's worth, I'm sorry. The call was… clumsy. There are so many things to keep track of at the moment. I must confess it did perhaps lack my usual… nuance.

ARCHIVIST

And perhaps you're now just trying to humanise yourself so we underestimate your next move.

ANNABELLE

Perhaps.

MARTIN

…

So… So that's it, then? We-We're just going to leave her here?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

We could *make* her tell us.

ARCHIVIST

No, we couldn't. I don't have my powers, and if it came to a physical fight I really don't rate our chances.

MARTIN

Hey, I can handle myself!

ANNABELLE

But can you handle me?

MARTIN

…

I don't like you.

ANNABELLE

I know.

MARTIN

God… Fine. Fine!

[BAG IS GRABBED]

Come on, John.

ARCHIVIST

[Vague] Oh… I'm sorry, what?

MARTIN

We're leaving.

ANNABELLE

Don't worry, Martin. We'll meet again. Hopefully when you're feeling a little bit more… open-minded.

MARTIN

I wouldn't count on it.

ANNABELLE

I would.

ARCHIVIST

That's the trouble with old houses, I suppose. Full of spiders.

ANNABELLE

You boys better take care of yourselves. I'm sure we'll see each other again very soon. Here, why don't I show you out.

ARCHIVIST

Fine.

[FOOTSTEPS PROCEED THROUGH THE HALLWAYS AND DOORS OF THE MANOR]

SALESA

Ah, you are off, then?

[FAINT SOUNDS OF MUSIC IN THE BACKGROUND]

ARCHIVIST

Yes, uh…

MARTIN

Thank you for all your hospitality.

SALESA

You are sure you won't stay a little longer? You're more than welcome.

ARCHIVIST

No. I… uh… got to, um, leave.

MARTIN

What he said.

SALESA

Ah, such a shame. And you're sure I can't give you a little something for the road? Food? Wine?

MARTIN

Er, no, thank you. *[Sighs]* Nice things, they… tend not to stay nice out there.

SALESA

True enough. Well, best of luck I suppose. And if, in the end, you can't save the world… you know where I am.

ANNABELLE

Actually, he doesn't.

[SALESA CHUCKLES]

SALESA

Ah, of course. What a shame. Well, then I guess it really is goodbye. Travel well. Don't be Strangers!

[MORE CHUCKLES, LOWER AND MORE DARK]

MARTIN

Heh… Yeah.

Come on, John. Let's go.

ARCHIVIST

Mm? What? Oh, yes, r-right. Yes.

[FOOTSTEPS WALK OFF]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[THE WASTELAND WINDS SWIRL AND MOAN ONCE MORE]

MARTIN

Feeling better?

ARCHIVIST

Um… yeah. I'm afraid I am.

MARTIN

Alright.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry. It would have been nice to stay.

MARTIN

[Wistfully] Yeah.

I'd almost forgotten what it was like, you know? A bit of peace.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, you could have –

MARTIN

No, don't say it, John. You know I never would. I c-can't just forget all the people out here. Besides, I'd rather be trapped in a post-apocalyptic wasteland with you than spend one more moment in

paradise with her.

ARCHIVIST

[Smilingly] That might just be the nicest thing you've ever said to me.

MARTIN

Yeah, yeah. Come on. We've got a job to do.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose we do.

[FOOTSTEPS HEAD OFF ACROSS SOFT GROUND]

Pity.

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

It's, er… going away. That peace, the safety, the memory of ignorance…

MARTIN

That's… Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Do you remember any of it? W-What Salesa said? Annabelle?

ARCHIVIST

Some, I think. It's, uh… Do you mind filling me in?

MARTIN

Wait, you need *me* to tell *you* something for once?

ARCHIVIST

I guess so. It's, er… It's gone. Like a dream.

What was it like?

MARTIN

…

Nice. It was… It was really nice.

[CLICK]

MAG182 – Wellbeing

Statement ########–22

[CLICK]

[DISTORTED HOSPITAL SOUNDS, HIGH-PITCHED WHINES AND UNPLEASANT MACHINERY NOISES UNDERSCORE VISITING TIME HERE]

MARTIN

Seriously?

ARCHIVIST

Yup.

MARTIN

Not an hour from an oasis, and we're already at sinister hospitals?

ARCHIVIST

It's the next stop on our journey.

MARTIN

Of course it is. And, of course, there's no chance for a warm-up?

ARCHIVIST

[Incredulous] A warm-up?

MARTIN

Yeah, y'know. Something a bit more… manageable. A-A chance to get our bearings a bit first.

ARCHIVIST

What exactly did you have in mind?

MARTIN

I dunno. Y'know like, like a creepy… bus stop or something?

ARCHIVIST

[Amused] I'm afraid not.

Truth be told, I'm actually feeling pretty great.

…

Which isn't necessarily a good thing, I suppose.

MARTIN

Yeah, I know.

[SIGH]

We stayed in Salesa's as long as you could.

ARCHIVIST

A bit longer, actually. I was, er… not really holding it together by the end.

MARTIN

Why didn't you say something?

ARCHIVIST

It's fine. I'm fine.

MARTIN

Yeah, now.

ARCHIVIST

I just thought, what with Daisy and Basira, and… You needed a break. Some time to process.

MARTIN

We both did. But apparently I'm the only one who got to.

ARCHIVIST

It's okay. I deal with things differently these days. I just wanted to make sure that you were doing okay. Was I wrong? To hold off?

MARTIN

…

No. No you weren't. Just getting the chance to sleep again was…

Ah well. Good while it lasted. Come on then, 'nightmare hospital' it is.

ARCHIVIST

Would it help if I told you we were actually starting to get a bit closer to London? Well, what was "London".

MARTIN

Actually, yes. That does help a bit. How many more?

ARCHIVIST

Depends on, uh… A few, at least.

MARTIN

Right.

[FORTIFYING DEEP BREATH]

Right, let's get on with it, then.

[FOOTSTEPS AND THE BACKGROUND NOISES GET SLIGHTLY LOUDER]

MARTIN

Okay… could be worse…

[THE SOUND OF BLADES, LIKE KNIVES BEING SHARPENED OR UNOILED SCISSORS WORKING]

DR DOE

Good!

MARTIN

[Shrieks] HAHHH! HMMM! Worse! It got worse! Worse, worse, ah, much worse…

ARCHIVIST

Martin, be polite.

Hello!

[THE BLADE SOUNDS ACCOMPANY DR DOE'S MOVEMENTS]

DR DOE

A pleasure yes hello. I am Doctor Doe, Jane. Welcome into my hospital, Inspector.

ARCHIVIST

Inspector?

DR DOE

You have come here to over-observe yes? To inspector?

ARCHIVIST

I, uh, I s-s-suppose so. Y-Yes.

DR DOE

Then follow. Let us tour our wellbeing centre. Keep your screams inside if you want to be polite.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[FOOTSTEPS AND BLADES]

MARTIN

[Nervously] It's a… Beautiful building.

DR DOE

Do not insult me.

MARTIN

I, uh… okay.

…

W-What's it called?

DR DOE

Called?

MARTIN

The hospital.

DR DOE

Ah. St. Bleedings Centre for Wellbeing.

MARTIN

[Drawled] Right.

ARCHIVIST

[Hushed] Martin, keep your eyes forward. On the doctor.

MARTIN

[Hushed] Seriously? She's **all** kinds of horrible –

ARCHIVIST

Better than what's in the rooms. Trust me.

MARTIN

Right.

DR DOE

You must look in here to see one of our four hundred operating theatres where we ensure any wellbeing is swiftly and awfully

dispatched.

MARTIN

[Hurriedly] Right, right

DR DOE

Sometimes is an anatomical wellness. Sometimes the wellbeing they possess is mental. In both cases we have grinding machines and anti-trained doctors on nails to deal with it. Nobody who comes into the hospital leaves right. Or at all.

MARTIN

Oh. Heh. Goooooood.

ARCHIVIST

Good lord.

DR DOE

It is a thing to look at isn't it? How much do they suffer, Inspector?

ARCHIVIST

I… What?

DR DOE

I help to cure them of their wellbeing but… I cannot know if my work is appreciated. I can only guess at fear. You know. Does it

work? Do they… hurt?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Yes they hurt.

[NOISE OF CONTENTMENT]

DR DOE

This pleases me.

MARTIN

Is there… Uh, is – is there anything here that isn't surgeries?

DR DOE

There are all sorts of machines. Plenty of medicine.

MARTIN

Any, uh… wards? Beds, maybe?

DR DOE

Sometimes rooms. Sometimes we throw them in a pit.

MARTIN

A pit, right, yeah.

DR DOE

We have a canteen.

ARCHIVIST

[Hushed] Don't ask about the canteen

MARTIN

[Hushed] I wasn't *going* to ask about the canteen!

ARCHIVIST

Um, Dr Doe, thank you so much for the tour.

DR DOE

There is more!

ARCHIVIST

Oh…

Good.

MARTIN

J-John. John, over there, is, is that – ?

DR DOE

He is a janitor. You are allowed to ignore him.

MARTIN

Right…

[DISCOMFITED SOUNDS OF THE ARCHIVIST]

John, J-John, do you – r-right…

Doctor! Is there an empty room he can use, please?

DR DOE

What is he doing?

MARTIN

He needs to… talk about all the horrible things this place does.

DR DOE

Oh, wonderful! This way.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[PREVIOUS UNPLEASANT SOUNDS GIVE WAY TO THE BLEEP OF A MONITOR]

[FAINT CRACKLE OF STATIC]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Patient: Jeremy W.

Date and place of birth: 4th August 1977, North Manchester General Hospital

Date and place of last contentment: 8th July 2013, sunrise, on Arthur's Seat hilltop, Edinburgh

Complaint: Generalised pain and creeping ennui

Surgical procedures thus far: 802.

Prognosis: Delightful

They always wore masks when they stood over his bed, those thin blue, or were they green, surgical masks, but they somehow covered the entire faces of the doctors and the nurses and the orderlies that swarmed in and around him. Jeremy didn't know how they could see with their eyes covered, but it was a long time since he had realistically thought there might be anything human behind the medical garb. They wore loose, baggy scrubs, head-coverings that gave no sign of hair, and thick, waterproof aprons.

[STRETCHING RUBBER NOISE]

Whenever they were about to touch him, they would snap on another vinyl glove over the layers and layers of similar gloves that would have long since cut off all the blood to their hands. If they had any.

There was no way to tell the time here. The window in his room grew bright and dark, but the light was wrong for the sun. At some

point he'd broken the glass in a desperate attempt to escape, but was confronted by a fluorescent light installed in front of a brick wall. He had tried to count how long it was on for and how long it was off, but it seemed almost random, and the pain grew worse when he tried to keep track of time.

At some point in each lighted time, they would come, unlocking the rusty iron door of his hospital room, and surrounding his bed three-deep. Some were tall and narrow, others wide or crooked. None of them were quite the right proportions to be convincingly human. They mumbled among themselves, meaninglessly saying words like 'intubation', 'radiology' or 'stat'. Occasionally one of them would touch him. The strange texture of their bodies was clear even through all the layers in which they hid. Eventually, one of them – and it was always a different one – would push to the front. 'I am the doctor,' it would say, 'are you well?'

[THESE MOVEMENTS, THROUGHOUT THE STATEMENT, ARE ACCOMPANIED BY FAINT, UNPLEASANT SQUELCHING SOUNDS]

This was it, the moment of truth, the point at which all Jeremy's anxiety came to a head. They all leaned in, hidden faces focused on him, as though drinking in his desperation. He had to make an answer, a simple yes or no. He'd learned the hard way that nuanced answers or stoic silence only made it worse.

So he picked one. A roll of the dice. In many ways, it didn't matter

which he chose, as there was no way to determine if the doctor of the day considered his wellness an aim to be achieved, or a condition that required curing.

‘Yes,’ he might say. ‘I am well.’ And if he had chosen right, the mask would widen as though the face behind it extended in a smile. ‘Wonderful!’ would come the response, ‘keep it up!’, and the crowd would file out and lock the door behind them, leaving Jeremy to wait for his next assessment.

But he rarely seemed to choose right. The rest of the time, a shudder of anticipation would pass through the medical things around him. ‘Well, let’s see what we can do about treating that,’ the doctor would say. And they would descend upon him, and drag him away for treatment.

[UNPLEASANT NOISES INTENSIFY AS A METAL DISH HITS THE FLOOR]

[A CURTAIN IS DRAWN BACK ON RUSTY RINGS]

[FAINT SOUNDS OF HOSPITAL MACHINERY AND VELCRO]

Patient: Renee T.

Date and place of birth: 27th November 1990, Royal Hallamshire Hospital

Date and place of last contentment: 27th November 2015, birthday

party prior to father's stroke

Complaint: Facial paralysis

Surgical procedures thus far: 560

Prognosis: Exciting

She always thought she hated the diagnosis the most. Those long, excruciating minutes of probing and poking, of temperature taking and needles drawing blood and mucus and tears and black bile and yellow bile all to be tested and tasted and twisted. A dozen staff flapping around her like carrion birds, stealing a little bit more of her each time for their own clumsy guesses and painful assumptions.

All the while the dread was building, focusing to a hot, tight little ball that settled just below her stomach and shot it through with agonising reminders of her fear. Her face, of course, remained impassive, unable to show her mounting dread.

Finally, one of the creatures would step forward, never one she recognised, and announce the diagnosis. 'Skin,' it might say, or 'liver', or 'bones', and once, only once, 'soul'. Then the treatment would begin.

[A CURTAIN IS DRAWN AGAIN]

[A STRAP IS TIGHTENED]

Surgery was the most common treatment, and one for which the doctors often reached. Renee would be strapped down tighter to her chair, and wheeled into the lift that smelled like ammonia and rot. It would descend far, far down into the belly of the hospital, before she was wheeled down the longest corridor in the building, barely wide enough to fit her trolley. The soon-to-be surgeon walked in front, whistling a tune that never resolved itself into a melody. Finally, she would be placed in the centre of the theatre, bright lights rendering the rows upon rows of silently watching doctors nothing but silhouettes.

[MORE STRAPS FASTENED AND A FAINT BUZZING BEGINS]

Sometimes there was enough anaesthetic to lock her limbs in place; other times they simply let her thrash. It dulled the pain, but the pain was never the problem. Regardless, they always strapped the anaesthetic mask tight to her face before they began to cut. The procedure varied depending on the diagnosis.

[VISCERAL SOUNDS OF SURGERY]

An organ diagnosis was simple: open her up, dig around inside her until they could remove something that could conceivably be a liver or a pancreas or a gallbladder, then put *something* back in its place. Sometimes what they put in was hard and sharp, digging into her when she tried to move; sometimes it was soft and putrid, and she could feel it rotting away within. Occasionally it was alive, and she

could feel it clawing to get out. When the diagnosis had been skin, they had peeled her piece by piece before they painted the inside of it with something dark and sticky, then sewed it back on. All through she could do nothing but watch as they cut and swapped and conjectured her body, unable to speak, to move, to do anything but watch these anonymous things play with everything she was.

But worse, perhaps, were the medicines. If they prescribed her medicine, she tried her best not to take it, but the pills would crawl down her throat when she wasn't paying attention, and the solutions would pour themselves in her ear when she lay down to rest. They might have done nothing, been naught but dust and sugar, but she could never be sure. The sickness, the seizures, the spasms, the sadness. If it wasn't the medicine, then it was inside her. And it had always been inside her. And she just didn't know.

[MACHINERY NOISES FADE AWAY]

[FAINT SOUNDS OF METAL AND HEAVY BREATHS]

Patient: Kelly M.

Date and place of birth: 1st April 1982, Bournemouth Hospital

Date and place of last contentment: Not recalled

Complaint: Headaches

Surgical procedures thus far: 220

Prognosis: Unwise

In her locked and darkened room she waited for the doctors to come. She looked to the small strip of fluorescence that spilled beneath the door, but nothing disturbed it. When would they come? When would they give her her next treatment?

The last doctor had told her it was her heart. They had rushed her down to the theatre, and tore open her chest something that looked like a pastry crimper and reached inside. Her bile rose at the memory of those strange boneless fingers brushing against her lungs. Then they had gripped something, and pulled it out of her slowly and… almost tenderly. Kelly remembered it had at first looked like a child, a baby, but it had her face, and stole away her smile. She didn't see what they did with it, but in its place they put a cold and glassy thing, a frozen tube that beats and pumps out ice water that makes her shiver all through the deepest parts of herself.

It still pumps now, as Kelly sits shivering in the corner of her room.

How long has it been? There is no way to tell, not here, but they will come back, they must come back. They always do. They must swap out this cold and hollow emptiness for some fresh pain and torture. She longs to feel the pain, as it is at least a feeling. But the fear has grown inside her now. What if the doctors are finished? What if she is treated, and this is all that there is now? What if she is well? Kelly looks to the door and waits.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[BACK TO THE GENERAL SOUNDS OF THE HOSPITAL, THIS TIME WITH ACCOMPANYING SCREAMS]

[FOOTSTEPS AND MOPPING SOUNDS APPROACH]

BREEKON

‘scuse me, Doctor. Just cleanin’ up.

MARTIN

Oh, I’m, uh, not a doctor.

BREEKON

Whatever. I got work to do.

MARTIN

Hang on… Hang on. Are you – Wait, which one are you? Hope, or, um –

BREEKON

Breekon. Hope’s dead. Do I know you?

MARTIN

Hmm. Hope’s dead. Bit on the nose, isn’t it?

BREEKON

Glad losing half my existence has given you a funny little metaphor.

MARTIN

Oh, well, I mean, that's not *actually* a metaphor per se, so…

BREEKON

[Weary] Piss off.

MARTIN

Oh, I'm sorry, am I, am I supposed to be sympathising? After everything you two did to people?

BREEKON

Guess not.

…

Who you waiting for? Maybe I can rip them away from you. See how you like it.

MARTIN

You're welcome to try.

BREEKON

Wait… No, I do know you. We gave you a delivery, didn't we? Years back. You're one of Magnus' lot, right?

MARTIN

…

I was, yes.

BREEKON

Wait, so does that mean, in there… The Archivist?

MARTIN

That's right.

BREEKON

…

I'll wait with you.

MARTIN

I… thought you had work to do.

BREEKON

Just spreading the smell around. Doesn't matter. None of it matters.

MARTIN

Right.

[DOOR OPENS]

ARCHIVIST

Hello again, Breekon.

BREEKON

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

He hasn't been bothering you, has he Martin?

MARTIN

Well…

BREEKON

Nah. Just been chattin'.

ARCHIVIST

Naturally.

So you've come to me.

BREEKON

Didn't mean to.

ARCHIVIST

No, but you have. Because there's something you want. Isn't there?

BREEKON

…

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Say it.

BREEKON

…

Kill me.

MARTIN

Wait, what?

BREEKON

The way I figure, you're the one that made all this. So if anyone can end it, you can. Can you do it?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. I can.

MARTIN

But, but like, why would you want him to? Isn't this whole thing like a dream come true for all of you… monsters?

BREEKON

You think I dream of mopping floors? No. We're – *I'm* a delivery man. We arrive somewhere, deliver terror and death, then leave, never to be seen again. Not much call for that now everyone's in their little kingdoms. Maybe if we were complete, we could've done something, but as is… No. Can't say I want this to be my forever.

ARCHIVIST

I see.

BREEKON

Besides, it hurts all the time. The Eye won't ever stop watching, and *[sigh]* it ain't great for an anonymous thing like us… like me.

ARCHIVIST

Very well. I warn you, though, it **will** hurt.

BREEKON

Only until it doesn't though, right?

ARCHIVIST

Right.

MARTIN

Good luck.

BREEKON

Whatever.

[A PAUSE, THEN FOOTSTEPS]

ARCHIVIST

[Intoning] Ceaseless Watcher, gaze upon this thing, this lost and broken splinter of fear. Take what is left of it as your own and leave no trace of it behind.

[STATIC RISES AS BREEKON GRUNTS IN PAIN AND THEN DISCORPORATES IN AGONY]

It. Is. Yours.

[STATIC FADES]

MARTIN

Right.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose we should find Doctor Doe. Finish our tour.

MARTIN

Do we have to?

ARCHIVIST

Probably not.

MARTIN

…

I don't really know how to feel about that.

ARCHIVIST

About Breekon?

MARTIN

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

…

Me, neither. I didn't enjoy it, but… I dunno, almost felt like doing a favour for an old friend.

MARTIN

An old friend who hated us.

ARCHIVIST

I guess.

Maybe we don't have to feel any way at all.

[NONCOMMITTAL MARTIN]

ARCHIVIST

Come on, this place is starting to get to me.

[FOOTSTEPS]

[CLICK]

MAG183 – Monument

Statement ########-23

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS SET AGAINST A FAINT BACKDROP OF SLOW STONE MOVEMENTS]

MARTIN

Oh, bugger off!

ARCHIVIST

Everything alright?

MARTIN

Oh, no, w-w-what even *is* that? I-It's like Escher ate a bad cathedral and threw up everywhere.

ARCHIVIST

It's a building. A tower, in a sense.

MARTIN

Oh yeah? And what sense might that be?

ARCHIVIST

[Faintly ominous] The Tarot sense.

[MARTIN SPLUTTERS WITH LAUGHTER]

MARTIN

Really?

ARCHIVIST

What? No. Sorry, it… felt like a good line.

MARTIN

No, no, it was. I just… I dunno, I… you did the look and… It's fine, sorry. What, what's the deal, though? Parts of it almost look like –

ARCHIVIST

The Institute.

MARTIN

Yeah.

THE ARCHIVIST

Yes.

It makes sense. After all, it was built on the ruins of what Robert Smirke constructed.

MARTIN

Smirke?

…

What? No. But, but, surely he's –

ARCHIVIST

Dead? Yes. Very much so. This place is… an homage, shall we say. A monument. To him and those like him, who tried to… categorise the world with themselves at the centre. In so doing, constructed the architecture of its suffering.

MARTIN

Bit of a mouthful.

ARCHIVIST

Would you prefer I described it as a cascading recursion of shifting arrogance and hubristic dead-ends?

[DOOR OPENS]

HELEN

I would.

[DOOR SHUTS]

MARTIN

[Weary] Hello Helen. Might have guessed you'd be into weird architecture. Very much your area of expertise, no?

HELEN

Hmm, depends. Would you describe 'petulant poet' as your area of expertise? I **am** weird architecture. Anyway, where have you been? I've been looking for you, but you both just vanished.

ARCHIVIST

Ah. Right. I see.

HELEN

I was so looking forward to catching up after that whole Basira and Daisy thing, but then pfft! You both disappear. I'd be **very** keen to know how you managed that little trick.

MARTIN

Why, it caught us by surprise too. I mean, w-we actually ended –

ARCHIVIST

[Firmly] We found somewhere to take a rest. That's all.

MARTIN

Oh, yeah. Ah. Yes.

HELEN

Fine. Be like that. I can appreciate the particular pleasure of a kept secret.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sure you can.

HELEN

Anyway, such a shame about Basira and Daisy. I was really rooting for them to make up.

MARTIN

[Splutters] Since when? What happened to – I mean, how did you put it… "A quick shot to the back of the head, and then back in time for tea", or whatever?

[HELEN GIVES AN EXASPERATED SIGH]

HELEN

Oh give over. I was obviously just prodding her, trying to make a point. She didn't want to kill her.

ARCHIVIST

What we want doesn't matter much these days.

[HELEN MAKES A RASPBERRY NOISE]

HELEN

Oh nonsense. What we want is the **only** thing that matters these days. And Basira wanted to join Daisy.

ARCHIVIST

She made her choice.

HELEN

With your assistance.

ARCHIVIST

It was still *her* choice.

HELEN

[Sighing] What a waste.

ARCHIVIST

No.

It wasn't.

MARTIN

Basira is…

She's going to be okay.

HELEN

Oh, is she? Do you want me to tell you what she's been up to while you were 'resting'? Where she is right now?

ARCHIVIST

You don't need to. I already know.

MARTIN

I don't.

[FAINT STATIC AS THE ARCHIVIST SEES]

ARCHIVIST

She's currently moving through "The Void." Hungry shadows drifting in the dark. She's been there a long time, now, struggling to find the path.

MARTIN

But she will.

ARCHIVIST

I think so.

HELEN

Yeah, she does always seem to manage, doesn't she? It's impressive, although a little bit… tempting at times.

MARTIN

Look, Helen, what do you even want? You keep turning up like a bad penny, and –

Honestly, it seems like it's… it's just to be a dick!

HELEN

Gasp! I am *trying* to be *friends*, Martin. Forever is a long time. And I occasionally like to have some company that isn't screaming.

MARTIN

What do you even think friendship is?

HELEN

I dunno, do I? The only personhood I have is from someone I ate.

MARTIN

You always said you were Helen.

HELEN

I am. I also ate her. It's very simple, as long as you don't think about it.

MARTIN

Look. Listen, I'm getting really sick of all thi–

ARCHIVIST

Leave it, Martin. She's just trying to get under your skin.

MARTIN

Yeah? Well, she's really good at it!

HELEN

Aww. Thanks, sweetie. But to be honest, I'm mainly just here to see which path you choose.

MARTIN

What do you mean?

HELEN

Well, you know, I need to know how much of a welcome mat to roll out.

MARTIN

Hang on…

ARCHIVIST

Martin, I'd prefer we talk about this alone.

HELEN

Oh, I bet you would. You were probably just going to bypass it entirely, weren't you? I can't believe you would deny him the choice to see his own domain.

MARTIN

My… my wha– John, my **what**?

ARCHIVIST

…

[Sighing] I was going to bring it up at the crossroads. Inside. I only just realised we would be going this way.

MARTIN

I have a domain?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

[HELEN MAKES A CRINGING NOISE]

HELEN

Awkward! Right, well. Well, this very much seems like a conversation the two of you should be having alone. So I'll, I'll be off, then.

ARCHIVIST

Watching from a distance?

HELEN

The Eye rules everything, Archivist. We're all snoops now!

[DOOR OPENS]

Ciao!

[FOOTSTEPS]

[DOOR SHUTS]

[SILENCE OF THE WASTELAND]

ARCHIVIST

Martin…

MARTIN

Are there people, John?

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

Are there people in my domain?

ARCHIVIST

Not many.

MARTIN

…

Do you need to do… your thing? Make a statement about whatever's going on in there?

I could use a moment to think.

ARCHIVIST

Sure thing. Yeah. I'll…

Yeah.

[FOOTSTEPS]

[STATIC RISES]

[THE SOUND OF SHIFTING, SLIDING, STONE UNDERSCORES THE STATEMENT]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

They scratch and scrape and scamper down the halls of icy granite, fingers that end in jagged nails probing, eager, desperate for the wide and stately passages of marble they are so convinced are just around the corner. This corner? No, the next one? Surely soon, it must be soon, yes, I have simply misplaced it for a moment.

They scrabble over smoothly shifting steps that grow and shrink to

hidden whims, and argue about the angle with nobody. If they are feeling very confident, they may lean down and stretch a curious tongue beyond their chipped teeth and rotten gums, desperate to add another sense to their observances, more evidence to support their declaration of what the world must be. Their beards are long and matted with their prevaricating spittle, and their hair is kept loose, hanging over their faces to hide the looks of confusion and fear.

There is a way out of here. There *must* be a way out of here. There is a pattern to the movements, an unseen system to the shifting of the doors and the opening of the tunnels. It simply takes observation and thought and patience and, above all else, intelligence. And that is what these men have in abundance. Intellects sharpened to the keen edge as a chef might sharpen their knife. They have spent their lives in holy objectivity, cleaving one Gordian Knot after another in the arena of publication and debate. They must simply study and learn if they are to escape the labyrinth. They will be the first to escape.

The one who sits in the central chamber cannot remember his name. But he knows that people called him ‘doctor’. He made sure of that. To ignore it would have been the greatest disrespect and he will *not* be disrespected. Doctor…uh, something, has been waiting here for a long time, timing and observing the rotations of the passageways above him. He knows for a fact that this is the central chamber because *he* is the one sat here. For his observations to make any sense they must be made from the centre of this place,

and this is where he is observing from, so it stands to reason that it is the centre. The only firm and solid place in a cacophony of undulating architecture; the only point from which it may be solved.

How long has he been watching now? Scratching his notes and formulae into his skin with a fragment of splintered obsidian. It does not matter, time means nothing in the pursuit of knowledge, and he has no concerns except the solution. And he has cracked it. His mouth breaks into a smile, lip splitting in the grin, spilling a drop or two of scarlet onto skin so pale as to now be near-translucent. He has seen the others pointlessly wandering the halls, of course. Simpering pretenders claiming to see patterns when they are only being led by the siren call of their pathetic little biases. Their ridiculous pet theories. Not like him. They'll remember him forever, the first to escape the Monument. His name will be hallowed with the greats: Doctor…uh… Doctor…

It doesn't matter. There will be time enough for names and gloating and awards once his achievement is secured. And now is the time to put it to the test, to prove once and for all that his peers are ignorant amateurs beside him, who can finally boast that he has found the key to the system in which they all struggle. He begins to walk, calmly, and with a measured certainty, to the east.

Figuring out which way *was* east was the first step, and the most simplistic one, for the central chamber in which he had positioned himself received a ray of light from above at regular intervals that could only be sunlight. And thus it was a simple matter to track the

course of the light to determine which direction was east and which was west. Once he had noticed that, it was all about keeping a close eye on the timing of the shifts, cross-referenced with the compass-point. In a westward direction, the corridors would invert every forty-seven seconds and shift incline every twenty, as well as growing a door to a staircase every two minutes. The staircase would be always be descending except for every fifth door, which would go up and twist to the north. And just like that, he had plucked order from what would, to any of the other charlatans that wandered this prison of geometry, appear to be true chaos. It was east that he travelled now, however, because every eighty seconds, the second corridor to the east made a sharp upwards inversion, leading to a full minute where every seven seconds a door would sprout from the ground. Only the first of these doors would lead you through to the true path that will–

A dead end. Wait. No. This… wasn't right. The first of the doors would lead him… Maybe that wasn't the first of the doors. But it, it was, it was the first door. But that would mean… No, he, he was right, he was certain, he had factored in all the timings. This didn't make sense. It, it wasn't fair! He had the answer! He –

[SOUND OF BODY FALLING, HITTING STONE AND CRACKING]

The ground opens up below the poor, panicking doctor. He barely has time to register before he is tumbling, falling, smashing bone and cracking skull on the stairs and columns he impacts on his descent, one after another. But it is not the fall that terrifies him,

not the pain of the impacts, but the fact that none of them should be there. That it doesn't make sense. And it must make sense. There must be a system. There must be, because if there isn't…

[THE BODY LANDS WETLY]

He lands with a heavy smack onto rough limestone and lies still, his body twisted and broken. He knows it will knit itself back together, slowly, painfully, as it always has before. But the thought of starting over, of composing yet another theory, fills him with a deep dread.

The broken doctor is not alone in the room where he now lies. Another figure, stooped and mumbling, staining bloody notes into a torn and discoloured robe glances over at him. A sneer passes across the cracked face of the doctor. He knows this man, a 'professor', at least he puffs himself up to be. His curled lip is reflected in the face of this pretender, who scampers over to where he fell, chunks of stone clutched tight in pink and bloody hands.

'I told you,' the professor gloats, 'that your precious compass-point rubric is nonsense. It's all about the stone, the rocks that make up this place. You see, here we have the limestone, here the granite. Taste it. No? Your loss. I have also identified basalt and slate in varying qualities shot through the staircases in veins. Now, if we ascribe a hierarchy of spiritual purity to these stones, with the hypothetical, but inevitable, marble at the top, then it is will be a simple matter of following the current of these stones through the–'

The doctor that lies on the floor has recovered just enough to laugh.

‘You’re still working on mineral theory? How painfully outdated.’

A flash of genuine fear crosses the face of the professor at this dismissal, before he picks up his chunk of granite, and begins to smash the doctor’s head in yet again.

[SOUNDS OF BRUTAL PEER REVIEW, AS THE STATIC RISES AGAIN]

[FOOTSTEPS]

MARTIN

Finished?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

Good.

…

I need you to explain something to me.

ARCHIVIST

Alright.

MARTIN

How do I have a domain? That doesn't make any sense.

ARCHIVIST

It's like I said. Everything here is either watcher or watched.

MARTIN

Subject or object, yes, I know, we've been over this.

ARCHIVIST

Well, you're a watcher, Martin. You worked for the Institute, you read statements. The Eye is… fond of you. You're not getting thrown into your own personal hell, which means…

MARTIN

[Quietly] That one of them belongs to me. But that's… H-How can I be a 'Watcher'? I didn't even know it existed!

ARCHIVIST

But you've suspected for a while now, haven't you?

MARTIN

Maybe. But that's not 'watching'!

ARCHIVIST

Do you want me to tell you about it?

MARTIN

No.

Yes.

N-No. No. I don't know.

[SEEING STATIC RISES]

ARCHIVIST

It's a small domain. A swirling mix of The Eye and The Lonely. Inhabited by a few lost souls whose fear is not of their isolation or their agonies, but that no-one will ever know of them. That they shall suffer in silence, and be mourned by nobody. That's why you can't really see it. It's why even if we do travel through it, you won't be able to see any of the people trapped there.

MARTIN

But I'm not an avatar.

ARCHIVIST

[Heated] Avatar isn't a *thing*, Martin! It's not–

It's just a word. A word used by… fools like Smirke to try and sort everything into neat little boxes, to reduce the messy spray of human fear into a checklist: Human, avatar, monster, victim. Only now, **now** there's a binary. There's finally a clear dividing line and, well, I'm sorry you're not happy with which side you've ended up on.

MARTIN

What about Daisy? Or Basira?

ARCHIVIST

Daisy carved through the domains of others. Basira, well… in a very real way, she was a sufferer in Daisy's domain. Maybe the only one. Hunting, following, hurting. Now Daisy's dead… she's free. Sort of. She's inherited something of Daisy's ability to move through the other domains.

For now, she'll feed off what she sees in them. As to whether the Eye ultimately gives her a domain of her own… I don't know yet.

MARTIN

You didn't tell *her* any of that.

ARCHIVIST

I didn't think the metaphysics of her place in the fear ecosystem was something she'd be particularly interested in at that moment.

MARTIN

Fair. But you seem very reluctant to tell *anyone* any of this stuff.

ARCHIVIST

I did try, right at the start, but you didn't seem to want to talk about it, so I didn't push it. It's hard, I have so much knowledge

but… how do I decide what people want me to share, and what they never want to know?

MARTIN

I guess that makes sense.

…

So What did you mean about the crossroads? When you were talking to Helen?

ARCHIVIST

It's a maze in there. Something between a, a Rubik's Cube and a Magic Eye picture. I can find us the way through easily enough but, well, for us, there are two ways out. Two paths to London.

MARTIN

What are the choices?

ARCHIVIST

One would be a long, winding route. We'd see a lot of horrors, but remain personally untouched.

MARTIN

And the other is my domain?

ARCHIVIST

Eventually. It's a shorter path. With faces we know along the way. Including Helen.

MARTIN

I thought Helen **was** her domain, with all the doors and that?

ARCHIVIST

She is, but she has a position within this… pseudo-landscape like any other.

MARTIN

O-Okay. So, so, I mean, I suppose we've got to do that one, right?

ARCHIVIST

We don't **have** to. W-We could just –

MARTIN

What? What? We, we could dodge around it? Take the path of denial? I guess. But… what is it you keep harping on about? 'The journey will be the journey'?

I mean… It's pretty obvious this one is my journey.

ARCHIVIST

If you're sure.

MARTIN

…

I’m sure I love you.

[FOOTSTEPS]

ARCHIVIST

I love you too.

[FABRIC RUSTLES]

Let’s go.

[CLICK]

MAG184 – Like Ants

Statement ########–24

[CLICK]

[CONTINUOUS SOUNDS OF CRAWLING, SCUTTLING AMASSED ANTS]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

There are so many. They are beyond number. Though one could pluck a numeral from the air and add some zeros, place a figure on how many tiny, twitching things exist within these tunnels, it cannot be comprehended. Not truly. The human mind can barely understand the true extent of a billion, and there are so many more than a billion of them. A trillion. An octillion. A quindecillion.

Just words and zeros; no connection to the true scale of what they are, how much they represent. They are past the place where numbers have meaning. How many ants are there? Uncountable.

They shift and roil in dark and shining tides across the walls of the tunnels, pock-marked in their turn by tiny earthen holes from which the things emerge, retreat and move as one. All around it may seem like solid earth that presses down and forces Jordan through on hands and knees, but it is not. He tries again to find somewhere to place his hands, an inch or less of bare rock or undisturbed earth,

but there is nothing. He does not know if this tunnel has the ants that bite, the ones that reek when they are crushed, or the ones so tough his weight does not destroy them, and he can still feel them moving and squirming beneath his palm.

Jordan knows there is no way out. No twisting, squeezing passage that promises escape, that will allow him to emerge, screaming and encrusted with filth and insect gore, to take a gasp of fresh and open air. But still he must push on, press forward, keep moving. For he knows that when he stops, when he pauses, when finally succumbs to exhaustion and collapses, that is when they descend upon him, subsume him beneath their impossible number. He can try to keep them out, to cover his ears, close his mouth, squeeze his nose shut, close his eyes. But not forever. Eventually he can't hold back the scream, but it is muffled the moment his lips part to let it out.

So he keeps moving, scrabbling, pushing forward, clawing his way towards nothing but another few precious moments where he is not covered. For a moment he hesitates at a crossroads, two tunnels before him, one large enough he need only stoop, the other narrow. He'd need to squeeze. And for a moment Jordan's sense of scale deserts him completely. Are these tunnels actually sized for him? Or has he himself been sized for this looping, intricate colony?

He shakes off such thoughts. The ants remain as small to him as ever, and as numerous. He chooses the tighter passage. Pressed so closely there can be fewer of them inside, and those that come for him will be quickly crushed. Or so he hopes. And as he presses

himself through the jagged stone, it seems as if he has calculated correctly. The sharp scraping of rock is almost a relief after the tickling itch he has been enduring for so long, as they tear at his ragged clothes that never fully rip, and always leave crevices enough for ants to hide.

There are few ants in this tunnel, so few that Jordan can barely feel them on him. At least, until they begin to bite, and the shooting pains begin to rip through him. He jerks wildly, trying to reach his tormentors to brush them off or kill them, but the tunnel is too narrow and keeps his arms pinned to his sides. He flails, cutting his back against the ceiling, and freezes, the panicked thought gripping him, the image of those ants crawling down, into his wounds, into his skin, hollowing him out and making their colony tunnels of his veins. He screams, a wordless, haggard cry of despair.

Leto hears the scream, echoing down through chamber after chamber of his friends, but he does not understand it. He waits for it to end, looking for its source, but it just seems to go on and on and on. Eventually he does not hear it, though he cannot say for certain that it has stopped. He wants to investigate, to see what sort of creature could make such a sound, but there is no step he can take that does not make him a murderer. He cannot stand or sit or shift without a hundred of those dearest to him paying for it with their lives.

Once, so long ago now that it seems almost like a memory of a dream, he knew these creatures, and they had known him. They had covered him, swarmed and embraced him, and he had, for a

short, glorious time, known what it was to be loved on an unimaginable scale. For each and every ant was a life, a mind no lesser than his own, guided by senses utterly alien yet as vital as any he possessed. If we are as ants to those things above us that torment and toy with us for their amusement, why should not ants be like us, each with a life as rich and intricate as any person?

Leto knows this to be true, as for that all too brief a time his senses were attuned to theirs, and he knew them, truly knew them. Unnumbered minds and existences, all connected together as one, and they had loved him. When he thinks of it, it prickles his eyes with regret at the loss, the endless rolling mass of love that he had all but begged to consume him.

But it is gone. His friends, the minds that he had once known so intimately, had left him. Now he sees them, moving and pulsing around him in a steady tide of tiny bodies, but he cannot reach them as once he had. He cannot make them understand, and he cannot apologise as his movements, as every gesture of his grotesque, lumbering body ends a dozen, a hundred existences. Even the tears that Leto sheds in grief will fall and drown his friends. He holds his arms in close and tries not to move.

[EARTH SHIFTS AND CRUMBLES]

[FOOTSTEPS]

There is someone else here now, someone shouting at him. The

voice, it is the one who was screaming in the tunnels. He is still screaming, yelling something at Leto. Blood drips from all over him, matted into his hair, crusting his lips with red. He flails his arms wildly and stamps his feet, pulping a mass of ants, ending their lives with such a cruel and callous disregard that Leto is filled with a sudden rage. His limbs are willed with an energy they have not known in an age as he lunges at the awful murderer.

[MOVEMENTS ACROSS DIRT]

Jordan sees the crying man coming, face twisted in some bone-deep hatred as he lunges at him. The relief he had felt, the momentary elation of seeing another human face in this dreadful labyrinth evaporates in an instance, replaced by the sick familiarity and bitter déjà vu of a cycle repeating itself once again. He steps to the side, almost falling, feeling the bite of more ants as he pushes into a mass of them on the wall of the small chamber.

[SOUNDS OF PULP AND EARTH]

The man who charged him lets out a noise of terrible realisation as he overbalances and topples forward, his whole body slamming into the dark insectile carpet that covers the floor.

[BODY COLLAPSES AMIDST EARTH AND SHIFTING FORMS]

The impact is heavy, and then he lies still.

He can feel them below him. The dead and the dying, murdered by Leto's clumsiness, his rash and destructive rage. The fear he felt as he was falling has been replaced by a sick dread of standing back up, of seeing the destruction his fall has wrought upon those that trusted him. The other man, that bloody omen of doom, is talking again, ranting, spewing nonsense about a queen, about finding her, about killing her. Leto struggles not to laugh; the words rattle around his mind in hollow recognition. There is no queen, he knows that. There is no single will to command the wondrous expanse of crawling lives. Each and every one is their own, and together they are so much more. He says as much to the interloper, preparing as he does so to stand, but before he can he feels the tell-tale tickle of his friends moving over him, covering him. He cannot rise, cannot lift himself without killing them. He begs them to save themselves, to let him up, but they will not understand his words.

Jordan leaves the man to his despair, the words rattling around in his head. No queen. He knows that, of course, but sometimes he allows himself the smallest flicker of hope that maybe there is a heart to this place, some core chamber where the bloated insectile monarch might sit, vulnerable and waiting.

But no, it is all the same, just the endless maze and ants and tunnels, unnumbered minds, meaningless in themselves, but together a being that dwarfs him, that if it wished to end his suffering could do so without a gesture. He turns the wrong corner, and the ants are upon him once again.

[RUMBLING EARTH MOVEMENTS, AS STATIC RISES]

[ANT SOUNDS CONTINUE TO PERSIST; MARTIN IS NONE TOO ENTHUSED]

MARTIN

Uh, J-John, uh…

[HEAVY SIGH]

ARCHIVIST

Are you alright?

MARTIN

Y-Y-Yeah. I-I mean, no, I just…

ARCHIVIST

Don't like ants?

MARTIN

Obviously not. No-one **likes** ants, John.

ARCHIVIST

As the embodiment of all knowledge, I am not entirely sure that's true but… okay. What is it?

MARTIN

N-No, it's just… you know the guy you were talking about? Jordan?

ARCHIVIST

The exterminator, yes.

MARTIN

I was having a look around and… I found him. A few tunnels over.

ARCHIVIST

Yes. I know.

MARTIN

Sorry, yeah, of course you do. Oh, stupid.

ARCHIVIST

No, it's alright. I've been trying to… I'm not sure what to do about it.

MARTIN

Well, who's the avatar in charge here then? That Amherst guy?

ARCHIVIST

No, John Amherst was encased in concrete, and shrivelled away to nothing after just a few years. If they'd unearthed him before the change, maybe, but as it was he was so starved of fear…

MARTIN

So *who*, then?

ARCHIVIST

Well, I'm not sure if…

MARTIN

John, who is it?

ARCHIVIST

It's the ants.

MARTIN

What? Ohhhh, like a, like a huge ant queen or something?

ARCHIVIST

No. All of them. As a collective. Crawling, devouring, spreading. One colony, one being, one avatar.

[FURTHER SOUNDS OF MARTIN'S LACK OF ENTHUSIASM]

MARTIN

Right. Great.

…

Nope. Nope. Do not like that one at all. No. Okay. So what happens if you destroy them, then? I-I mean, if they're both the avatar and the domain?

ARCHIVIST

The whole place would collapse and then, without The Corruption's influence, I think The Buried would flow in to fill the gap.

MARTIN

I thought you said Smirke's Fourteen was a load of bull?

ARCHIVIST

I said it was limited, and draws artificial borders, but it does have its use when it comes to conceptualising these things. Regardless, I'm pretty sure we'd be left somewhat… entombed.

MARTIN

But we could get out, though?

ARCHIVIST

Eventually.

…

Martin, do you want me to…

MARTIN

No. No, probably not a good idea.

ARCHIVIST

Hm.

Oh, uh, Martin, just one, one second… you got…

[MARTIN'S EXPRESSES EXTREME DISPLEASURE AT FINDING ANTS ON HIMSELF]

MARTIN

Definitely one of my least favourites, so far. Can we just go, then? Please?

ARCHIVIST

I'm still not sure what to do about Jordan.

[SOUNDS OF MARTIN PATTING & SWIPING HIS CLOTHES]

MARTIN

I mean, what can we do really? You've been pretty clear there's no way for us to help the people who are trapped here as victims so… so, we leave him here like all the others, and eventually we save everyone.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah… I just… I don't usually know them. Jordan Kennedy did me a favour. He helped me with my own fear, a-about Jane Prentiss.

MARTIN

I sometimes forget that most of the people we know are avatars.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, that… Hmm. Not sure I like that realisation. Our peers…

MARTIN

Yeah. Dinner parties are going to be tricky.

[BRIEF, SAD, CHUCKLES]

So what are we doing, Jon?

ARCHIVIST

I want to see him.

MARTIN

Fine. Do your 'knowing' thing and then we can –

ARCHIVIST

With my eyes.

MARTIN

…

Okay. But just so you know, the tunnels to get there are absolutely craw–

Yeah, okay. Yes, no, yes, you already know.

Lead on.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[MORE SWARMING SOUNDS AS JORDAN'S PLAINTIVE WAILS & STRUGGLES RING OUT]

MARTIN

Christ…

John?

JORDAN

You… What are –? F-From the Magnus – Ah! Help me!

MARTIN

John, what are we doing here?

ARCHIVIST

I don't… I –

[ANGUISHED SCREAMS OF AGONY]

JORDAN

Help! Please!

ARCHIVIST

Ceaseless Watcher, look upon this man –

MARTIN

John…

ARCHIVIST

– subsumed by terror and gripped with swarming fear. Gaze into him, through him… And out of him.

[DURING THE INCANTATION, THE ARCHIVIST'S POWER RISES AS THE ANT SWARMING, AND JORDAN'S CRIES, SUBSIDE]

MARTIN

What does that mean?

ARCHIVIST

Make him a vessel of your hunger, staring out and harvesting with a thousand, thousand, thousand, tiny, eager, eyes.

MARTIN

Hang on…

ARCHIVIST

Gift him your power and protection. Make him yours.

[ANT SOUNDS ARE A LOT LESS, AS JORDAN STOPS SCREAMING]

…

Jordan?

JORDAN

What… What is this?

ARCHIVIST

How do you feel?

JORDAN

[Quavering] I don't… I know you. From the Magnus Institute. What are you doing here? What is this?

MARTIN

[Thin-lipped] Yeah, I'm curious about that myself.

JORDAN

What did you do to me? I feel…

ARCHIVIST

Better?

JORDAN

Sick. Like I–

[THERE IS A SIBILANT BUZZ, SIMILAR TO THAT OF INSECT WINGS, AS JORDAN TALKS]

[HE GASPS]

What? What was that?

ARCHIVIST

You're seeing it. Feeling it all, the fear of all the others here.

JORDAN

All that screaming… They're everywhere… crawling over *them*, like they did me… It feels…

ARCHIVIST

Good?

JORDAN

…

Yeah. But wrong. Sick.

What did you do to me?

ARCHIVIST

I helped you.

JORDAN

Helped me? I don't feel right, I, I just – Ah! No I don't – argh! I don't want this!

[THE INSECTILE NOISE IS MORE PRONOUNCED AS HE GETS AGITATED]

MARTIN

Jordan? Jordan, just relax, it'll be fine, you'll be okay.

JORDAN

No, I don't – I didn't ask for this!

ARCHIVIST

You preferred the ants?

JORDAN

No!

ARCHIVIST

Covered and agonised? I know how scared you were, I felt it.

JORDAN

It was…

It was a nightmare. And I couldn't wake up. But… *this* is… I don't understand…

ARCHIVIST

I'll try to explain.

[Intones] The world is over. Dark powers that feed on fear have transformed everything we know into a twisted hellscape, where humanity is tormented to feed their hunger. We're all trapped, but I have a certain level of 'power' in this new world. So, I –

JORDAN

You turned me into what? A torturer?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

JORDAN

Why?

MARTIN

Good question. John? Care to enlighten us?

ARCHIVIST

What was I supposed to do? I owed you. Didn't want to just watch you suffer.

MARTIN

It's what you've been doing for everyone else. It's what you're expecting **him** to do.

JORDAN

I don't… I don't know how to **be** this. I don't want to scare people.

ARCHIVIST

No. But you'll learn.

JORDAN

…

Am I still me?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know how to answer that.

I can put you back if you want. You could become a victim again? Rather than complicit.

JORDAN

…

No. This isn't… I didn't want this. But I can't, I *can't* go back to that. I can't.

ARCHIVIST

Very well.

MARTIN

I'm sorry. It's… It's a lot to take in all at once.

JORDAN

Can I at least… go outside? Can I leave these tunnels, the ants? Am I… free?

ARCHIVIST

You're part of them now. And they're a part of you.

JORDAN

Oh.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, the world is… It's bad all over. I just wanted to spare you what I could.

JORDAN

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Because… because I owed you.

JORDAN

Please. Leave.

ARCHIVIST

Jordan, I –

JORDAN

I'd like to be alone.

MARTIN

Of course.

JORDAN

No, wait.

I'll never be alone again, will I?

MARTIN

…

Come on John. We should just go.

[FOOTSTEPS]

JORDAN

The ants… If I told them to attack you. Could they?

ARCHIVIST

…

No.

Nothing can really touch us anymore.

[CLICK]

MAG185 - Locked In

Statement ########-25

[CLICK]

[A PRISON ALARM SOUNDS, METAL DOORS SLAM]

[THROUGHOUT THE STATEMENT, A BED CREAKS AND THERE ARE FAINT INSTITUTIONAL SOUNDS]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

They have never told her what crime she has been arrested for. She isn't even sure she was ever arrested. They had walked up to Tina in the street, as she was loading her car with shopping, and placed a hand on her shoulder gently but with the certainty of gravity. Her fingertips still remembered the chill of the milk as she placed it in the boot of the old Toyota. She had smiled when she turned, reassured by the sight of the uniforms, and didn't even notice the sternness of their expression or the fact that the faces beneath the helmets were identical. All day she had been feeling on edge, smelling the faintest hint of something rotten on the wind. Had it been her imagination? No, others had sensed it too, she was sure of it. In the shops she had seen them, eyes darting nervously, fingers drumming incessantly on trolly handles, waiting for whatever was coming. And all day, that intense, unshakeable feeling that she was

being watched.

So when she turned and saw them standing there, so official in their vests and helmets, what else was she to think? Ah, thank goodness, it flitted through her mind as Tina felt herself relax, whatever it is, someone is taking care of it. Because that's what they were for, to take *care* of these problems, to shuffle people away for their own protection, and keep the world working as it should be. She smiled, even as the shadowed figure did not remove his hand from her shoulder.

"Hello, officer. How can I help?"

"I'm afraid you're going to have to come with us," they had said, as the sky above them began to change.

And then she was here. Tina didn't remember the journey, not properly. There was an image of the back seat of a car, bruised face pressed against metal grating, wrists pinched so tight by metal she could feel every beat of her pulse. Or was it the back of a van, deep rumblings from the wheel well beneath her seat, vision obscured by a black bag that smelled of other people's despair? Had she been forced to listen to a sanctimonious lecture on choices, on right and wrong and other luxuries? Or sharp-edged jokes at her expense in a language she didn't quite understand, which turned to shouts and blows when she risked a movement. It didn't matter, it wasn't her memory. She was just here.

The room in which Tina found herself was barren: a metal bench

encrusted with something black and flaky, and a bucket in the corner. That was it. It was obviously a mistake, some miscommunication somewhere, or a case of mistaken identity. These things were unfortunate, but sometimes they happened. One of the people in charge would no doubt realise and sort it all out. She smothered the kernel of dread that was lurking in her chest. She just needed to be patient.

The bench was uncomfortable to sit on, and she began to shiver from the cold. Had she ever been this cold before? Outside, of course, in the deepest winter, bundled up and pushing through to a heated home. But sat inside, with nowhere to go, nothing to change or wrap up in, just a thin grey jumpsuit, unable to do anything but sit there and shiver. That was a sort of cold that was alien to her.

[MORE CREAKS, THEN FOOTSTEPS]

She stood, trying to push down her physical discomfort and worry with movement. The cell was small and cramped, and Tina kept hitting her shin on the bench. She paused, casting an eye over the rough concrete wall surrounding her, covered in deep grooves and… scratch marks. She turned away quickly, and saw the window above her. Had there been a window when she had first come here? When had that been? It had no glass, just thick iron bars, but if she stood on tiptoe and really strained, she could just about see out of it.

[FAINT SOUNDS OF THE OUTSIDE WORLD]

When she saw the world beyond her walls, her heart sank. The world seemed so bright and normal. The sun was high and shining, though none of it passed though the bars, and if she tried to reach through, the light seemed to shrink from her skin. Cars passed by on the road. Somewhere, a bird was singing. The world didn't miss her, didn't know or care about what was happening beyond these walls.

A child passed by, a girl with plaited blonde hair and a bright orange bicycle. Tina called quietly, suddenly afraid of who might be listening on the other side of her cell door. The child's eyes met hers, the first moment of human connection that she had really felt since she'd arrived… but hadn't she only just got here?… and Tina felt herself begin to smile. Then the child's eyes narrowed in sudden hatred as the little girl bent down, picked up a rock and hurled it at the window. It passed cleanly through the bars and hit Tina square in the forehead. Her vision flashed white with pain as she fell back, slamming against the bench with a crunch.

[SOUND OF COLLAPSE AGAINST AN OBJECT]

Part of her wanted to lie there and weep, overcome with what was happening to her. But faster than that came the anger, the indignation. How dare they? She did not deserve this. She was better than this. This did not happen to people like her. She clawed her way back up to the window and looked out, trying to see the spiteful little brat, but the girl was now behind her father, who shooed her away with a terror in his eyes, a terror aimed at Tina.

And for the briefest of moments she was certain that the man's fear was mocking her.

Behind her she heard the sound of a key sliding into the filthy iron lock of her cell door. She tried to tell herself that sound was a good thing, that it meant someone was coming to check on her, to clear this all up, to tell her what was happening. But this was not the place for such lies.

[A DOOR CREAKS OPEN, KEYS JANGLE, THE DULL ROAR OF THE PRISON POPULATION IS LOUDER]

The door opened and there they stood, identical in their uniforms, their skin fish-belly white and their eyes gleaming with malice.

[HEAVY FOOTSTEPS, MORE KEYS, THE DOOR CLOSES AND SOUNDS ARE FAINTER ONCE AGAIN]

And then she was back in her cell. She didn't remember the interview, not properly. Or had it been a trial? There had been a man, she was certain of it, and he had smiled as he sat across from her. And there had been a file, a thick manila envelope stained with grease and coffee, which held the pages of her life typed out in a small, no-nonsense font. She remembered that she had read those pages with increasing alarm. It had all been there, all of it. Her life, her loves, her choices, her mistakes. No details spared, no nasty inference ignored. There was no benefit of the doubt here, no understanding or kindness, only the disinterested ink of words that

would see her prosecuted.

“None of these things are illegal,” she had said.

The man had laughed at that. It had been a dry and hacking sound that cracked the mirrored glass of the interview room, and made the juror’s ears bleed. He stroked his badge… or had it been that gnarled and bloodstained gavel?.

“The laws have changed.”

And now she is back in her cell. Or a cell that looks like hers. It is smaller, perhaps, the metal bench is cleaner, but rusted through on the hinges, so when she lies on it, it squeals and threatens to collapse. They never told her any charges, never gave her any verdict. She is certain she will see that man, the judge or the detective or the warden, she will see him again. Perhaps she will be moved, or written up, or reprimanded. The cold is settling in, the hunger is biting her as she tries to sleep. There has been a mistake. She should not be here, but she had met the person in charge, she had pleaded her case, told him of what had happened. And he had laughed at her.

[METALLIC RATTLING]

A tray slides under the door, spilling thin, watery stew over the floor, tipping out chunks of something that glistens and writhes. Tina ignores it as she grabs the hatch and tries to keep it open, tries to tell the guard, to explain what’s happened, that something’s gone

wrong, that she shouldn't be here. This isn't right! Why can't anybody see this? This isn't the place for people like her.

[METALLIC SLAMMING]

The hatch slams shut on her fingers and she pulls her hand back, pain robbing her voice of protest for a moment. Outside the window night has fallen and the temperature starts dropping even further. Perhaps if she behaved they would give her a blanket? Perhaps she could see other people, share her story of injustice? Tina tells herself so many lies, as she shivers in the dark. The moonlight falls on those old and faded scratch marks on the concrete wall, and as she places her hand on the shallow grooves, they match her fingers perfectly. She refuses to count the tally marks that cover every inch.

[STATIC RISES AND FADES]

[METAL DOOR CREAKS OPEN]

MARTIN

All done?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

I still think doing it in one of the actual cells was a bit much.

ARCHIVIST

It was the most soundproof place I could find.

MARTIN

Pffft. Soundproof? Yeah, dream on.

ARCHIVIST

You… heard? I-I'm sorry. I know it was –

MARTIN

I actually didn't, but only because I was too busy hearing what was going on in all the other cells.

ARCHIVIST

Ah. Well, they seem to have quieted for a while at least.

MARTIN

Yeah, one of those… things, passed by just now, and everyone shut right up.

ARCHIVIST

Mmm. Jailors have that effect.

Shall we go?

MARTIN

What if another one comes along?

ARCHIVIST

It's fine. We're, uh, we're 'guests of the Warden'.

MARTIN

Eurgh.

ARCHIVIST

Mmhmm. Come on.

[FOOTSTEPS AND METAL CREAKS]

MARTIN

Does it not bother you?

ARCHIVIST

What? Being a 'guest'?

MARTIN

Yeah. It's not like it resisted. Hell, it was chummy.

ARCHIVIST

Would you rather it had attacked?

MARTIN

No it's just… Is that how these creatures see us now? As one of them?

ARCHIVIST

[Amused] I forgot that's a new experience for you.

MARTIN

Excuse me?

ARCHIVIST

You have to remember I've had this for years. Right from the start, it's always been 'Archivist' this and 'Archivist' that. All these weird, awful creatures assuming I'm 'in' on all the secrets. Even when they were trying to kill me, they treated me like I was a… a peer.

MARTIN

Yeah, but they were still trying to kill you.

ARCHIVIST

Not all of them. And now? Sure the power's shifted, it's all politeness and respect, but it still feels just like more of the same. I guess I just stopped caring at some point. Besides they are technically right, I *am* one of them. To a degree.

MARTIN

I suppose.

ARCHIVIST

I think the real question is how are *you* finding it?

MARTIN

It's not the same. I'm still just your 'plus one'.

ARCHIVIST

[Amusedly] Don't put yourself down. It's not your fault you're a bit overshadowed. I am such a very big deal after all.

MARTIN

Oh, very big arse, more like it.

[THE ARCHIVIST CHUCKLES]

ARCHIVIST

Either way, even if I wasn't here, I don't think you'd be in any danger. Not anymore. I wasn't sure when we first started out, I hadn't properly, er… looked into it, as it were. But now I'm certain.

MARTIN

I'm one of them.

ARCHIVIST

One of… us.

MARTIN

That's not as comforting as you think it is.

ARCHIVIST

Doesn't mean it's not true though.

[PRISON & PRISONER SOUNDS ARE CLEARER HERE]

MARTIN

And this is all because I've been given a domain? Because apparently I somehow have people's fear feeding me?

ARCHIVIST

Well, feeding The Eye *through* you, but yes.

MARTIN

Even though I didn't ask for it? Did nothing to *deserve* it?

ARCHIVIST

'Deserve'. Huh. Now there's a word that always causes trouble.

MARTIN

Don't be patronising.

ARCHIVIST

I just mean that nobody here *deserves* the position they've found themselves in, not really. I suppose a few may have asked for it, sought it out even, but far more didn't. They just made the wrong choices for the right reasons. Or even the right choices. But ones that still led them here in the end.

MARTIN

I hate it.

ARCHIVIST

On balance, that's probably a good thing.

[SUDDEN RATTLING AGAINST METAL BARS]

INSPECTOR

Hey! Hey, you! Yeah, I know you!

MARTIN

Uh…

INSPECTOR

It's… f-f-from the, uh, Magnus Institute! Um… ah… Mark!

ARCHIVIST

You know him?

MARTIN

Martin.

INSPECTOR

Martin, right, yeah! You remember? You tipped us off, and we came and nicked your boss, that Bouchard bloke.

MARTIN

Oh! Oh, right! The, um… oh, Inspector… I-I'm so sorry, I've forgotten your name.

INSPECTOR

So have I. I'm just 547 in here.

MARTIN

God, I'm so sorry.

INSPECTOR

You've gotta help me!

MARTIN

Oh. I – er… I don't –

INSPECTOR

I heard you! You said you were chummy with the Warden. And I need to get out, I-I can't – This place – You've got to help me!

ARCHIVIST

Martin? What do you think?

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

I decided about Jordan. This place is from your past.

MARTIN

Yeah, but I mean, only briefly.

ARCHIVIST

Still.

INSPECTOR

Please! Martin! Come on mate, just returning a favour, yeah?

[MARTIN EXHALES]

W-Wh-What's wrong? You-You've got to hurry! Th-There's not much time.

[PACING]

MARTIN

Why are you here?

INSPECTOR

What?

MARTIN

What are you so afraid of, that you ended up in here?

INSPECTOR

I didn't do anything!

MARTIN

John?

[COMPELLING STATIC RISES]

ARCHIVIST

Why are you here?

INSPECTOR

[Resisting] I don't… Argh! Stop! Stop!

ARCHIVIST

I will stop when you answer the question.

INSPECTOR

Argh! Look, you can't know if they're all guilty, alright? It's just about evidence…

[MARTIN SIGHS]

MARTIN

[Flatly] Right.

INSPECTOR

Sometimes you just have to… to…

MARTIN

What, guess?

INSPECTOR

I'm sorry! Alright?

MARTIN

No. You're just afraid.

INSPECTOR

Please, I'm – It's almost lights out. I can't be here for lights out. Not again. Please? You owe me!

ARCHIVIST

This place is born of their nightmares. And of yours.

MARTIN

If you made him a watcher, he'd become part of this place?

ARCHIVIST

He would.

MARTIN

And if he was… Would he enjoy it?

INSPECTOR

What are you talking about? No! Of course not!

ARCHIVIST

You know I can't see the future.

MARTIN

But?

ARCHIVIST

But I can see his past.

MARTIN

And based on *that*?

ARCHIVIST

He probably would. Yes.

INSPECTOR

Hey, fuck you, you scrawny little tit! What the hell do you know?

MARTIN

…

Leave him.

INSPECTOR

What? No, no, please! I didn't mean it!

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

[FOOTSTEPS AS THEY WALK AWAY]

INSPECTOR

[Fading] I need your help! Please! Please! D-Don't go away! Come back – look, we can talk – we can – Please! Mark! Martin! Martin! I can't stay here! Don't leave me here!

[WALKING CONTINUES, AS MARTIN EXHALES]

MARTIN

That was horrible.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry I put you in that position.

MARTIN

No, you were right to. That's… that's a lot of power to have to deal with. Lot of responsibility.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, thank you, Uncle Ben.

MARTIN

[Chuckle] Pop culture? Really?

ARCHIVIST

I'm allowed to know what Spiderman is.

[ANOTHER SIGH]

MARTIN

Not helping people is still a decision, isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

Well, you saw Jordan, I'm not sure 'helping' is –

MARTIN

I know, I know, not the right word. Ignoring them then.

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

It's a choice I've been making a lot recently.

MARTIN

I guess we should get used to it. Knowing that all these awful things are happening for *our* benefit.

ARCHIVIST

Maybe it's better if it never gets comfortable.

MARTIN

Maybe.

[THEY WALK IN SILENCE FOR A WHILE]

MARTIN

Hey, do you feel that?

ARCHIVIST

[Fading] Martin? Martin, listen you need to get ready, we're about to enter –

[HARSH CRACKLE OF STATIC]

MARTIN

Yeah, my domain. Yes, right, I get it. Dream logic. And timing apparently.

…

[METALLIC SOUNDS HAVE BEEN REPLACED BY FAINT EERIE WIND SOUNDS]

John? John?

Oh…

Shit.

[CLICK]

MAG186 - Quiet

Statement ########-26

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS ON GRAVEL OR DIRT, AS A LIGHT RAIN FALLS]

MARTIN

So this is it, then.

…

How dreary.

[FOOTSTEPS]

[Calling] Hello!? Anybody!?

John?

Hello!

…

Big surprise.

Well at least I can still remember everything this time. And no more bloody chairs.

It's weird, though. Never actually been anywhere like this. That said, it is kind of… huh…

[STATIC RISES]

[THERE IS A SLIGHT REVERB ON ALSO MARTIN'S FIRST WORDS AS HE APPROACHES]

ALSO MARTIN

Wuthering Heights.

MARTIN

Yeah. God, I hated studying that. It was all just so…

ALSO MARTIN

Overblown.

MARTIN

Yeah…

ALSO MARTIN

But that cover… those wide empty spaces. It felt right, didn't it?

MARTIN

So what? That's where we are?

ALSO MARTIN

Right down to the monochrome.

MARTIN

Hm.

D'you have an umbrella?

ALSO MARTIN

No.

But you don't want one. We like the rain.

MARTIN

True.

ALSO MARTIN

Because it makes the sadness feel at home. It turns it from a burden into –

MARTIN

[Sigh] – an indulgence

ALSO MARTIN

That's right.

[PACING]

MARTIN

So what is this? You're part of me so you know everything about me? Is that it?

ALSO MARTIN

Yes.

MARTIN

Because you're part of my domain?

ALSO MARTIN

Also yes.

MARTIN

Some sort of cosmic joke about 'being alone with my thoughts', I assume?

ALSO MARTIN

I'm here because you're trying very hard *not* to be alone. To resist the comfort.

MARTIN

So, instead I get to talk to myself?

ALSO MARTIN

Apparently.

[PACING CONTINUES THEN STOPS]

MARTIN

Okay, so if I'm *so* desperate not to be alone, why isn't John here? Hmm? He can find me anywhere.

ALSO MARTIN

I don't know.

MARTIN

[Dubious] Oh yeah?

ALSO MARTIN

Look, I know what you know. Maybe I'm just a bit more… open about it.

MARTIN

And what do you mean by that?

ALSO MARTIN

Like how you don't actually want him here? Maybe that has something to do with it?

MARTIN

You've no idea what you're talking about!

ALSO MARTIN

I mean, you can argue with me if you like. Seems like a bit of a waste, though.

MARTIN

I – No, a –

ALSO MARTIN

It's alright. It's hard to be vulnerable.

MARTIN

[Resigned] It's not that.

ALSO MARTIN

No?

MARTIN

No, I just… I'm ashamed to let him see this place, alright. To see what – I don't know, what *feeds* me?

ALSO MARTIN

Sure, that's part of it, but… it's not the whole thing, is it? Not really.

MARTIN

What do you mean?

ALSO MARTIN

Well, if you don't count 'memory manor', when was the last time you were even on your own?

MARTIN

Well I… hmm.

ALSO MARTIN

It has been a **very** long time since the Institute.

MARTIN

That's… a good point.

ALSO MARTIN

It's okay to want a bit of space now and then. New romance is hard. And armageddon makes it even harder, never mind the fact that you're metaphorically joined at the hip thanks to the whole 'eye-lord' thing. It's okay to want some space.

MARTIN

Ohhhhh, I see.

ALSO MARTIN

See what?

MARTIN

I get it. So that's your deal. You tell me what I want to hear to try and get me to stay.

ALSO MARTIN

[Wearily] Seriously? Fine. If you don't want to engage, if you want to pretend I'm just some… temptation ghost, you go ahead. Knock yourself out. Like I said, I'm not your enemy.

MARTIN

[Archly] Oh really? I thought you said you were me?

ALSO MARTIN

Right, yes. Very clever.

MARTIN

We have our moments, I guess.

ALSO MARTIN

Look, if you want to leave, you can. It's not a problem.

MARTIN

You won't try to stop me?

ALSO MARTIN

I mean, it *really* doesn't matter to me. You leave and I'm just you again. It's all the same to me, really.

MARTIN

So why do you want me to stay then? Hmm?

ALSO MARTIN

Because **you** want to stay. Because you want to have a real *rest*. To just breathe and … be quietly sad, I guess.

[SILENCE AS THE RAIN GETS A LITTLE HEAVIER]

MARTIN

It's not healthy.

ALSO MARTIN

Maybe not, but I'm not entirely sure what healthy options are even left, at this point.

MARTIN

We *could* talk to John about it.

ALSO MARTIN

We could. But we both know that loved ones make the worst therapists. They're too wrapped up in trying to stop you hurting to actually help. But hey, we know all about that, am I right?

MARTIN

There's nothing wrong with comforting people.

ALSO MARTIN

A cup of tea isn't a resolution. At best it's a… a plaster. At worst… a muzzle.

MARTIN

Yeah, yeah.

Even so, I could murder a cuppa. I doubt you've got a kettle out here though.

ALSO MARTIN

As a matter of fact, I do have a thermos.

MARTIN

You're joking?

ALSO MARTIN

This is our domain. You're not supposed to suffer here. Well, not like the others… you know what I mean.

[A METAL FLASK IS UNSCREWED]

[ELONGATED SOUND OF TEA POURING]

Here.

[FLASK IS RESEALED]

[MARTIN SIGHS DEEPLY AS HE SIPS]

MARTIN

Wait that's… wait, is that…?

ALSO MARTIN

Yeah, sorry about that. There's only so much we can do, what with the new world and everything. Even the good things get tinged with memory.

MARTIN

Eurgh. Oolong. Of course. Of course! Whenever I asked a question she didn't like, or she wanted to stop the conversation –

ALSO MARTIN

Off you'd go to put the kettle on.

MARTIN

And it always had to be that bloody oolong. Eurgh.

[ANOTHER SIP]

Blergh.

ALSO MARTIN

…

It wasn’t your fault.

MARTIN

Yes, it was.

ALSO MARTIN

That’s just the guilt talking.

MARTIN

Oh, you think?

ALSO MARTIN

She was awful.

MARTIN

She wasn’t well.

ALSO MARTIN

Both things can be true.

MARTIN

She was still my mum! Our mum. Whatever!

ALSO MARTIN

[Emphatically] And we’re glad she’s dead.

MARTIN

Jesus…

ALSO MARTIN

Too much? Like I said, I'm a bit more open.

MARTIN

I –

ALSO MARTIN

Don't lie. You don't need to. Not here. It's just us.

[HEAVY SIGH FROM MARTIN]

MARTIN

If we're glad, why do I feel so…

ALSO MARTIN

Guilty?

Because you feel *guilty* about *everything*.

MARTIN

That's… That's not –

ALSO MARTIN

Your mother.

MARTIN

Stress is a proper factor in a stroke –

ALSO MARTIN

Everything that's happened to John.

MARTIN

I brought Jane Prentiss to the Institute!

ALSO MARTIN

The end of the **entire** world?

MARTIN

If I'd done what Peter had asked… If I'd not chickened out, and just killed Elias when I had the chance…

ALSO MARTIN

Really? **Really**? That's how you're choosing to remember it? Chickening out?

MARTIN

I remember it was the wrong choice.

ALSO MARTIN

You **choose** to remember it that way, and so the guilt –

MARTIN

I get it, alright? But I need it. I-I choose the guilt, because…

ALSO MARTIN

[Leading] Because…

MARTIN

Because it motivates me to do better!

ALSO MARTIN

…

Does it though? Or… does it just keep paralysing us, make us shrink back and wait, hoping things work out? Like with John, when we thought the worms had got him.

MARTIN

Hey, to be fair, he still kind of hated me back then. I'm *really* not sure it would have been the time to take my shot.

ALSO MARTIN

Fair. He was projecting hard. Between us, that guy's got some real issues.

MARTIN

Hey! Pretty sure we love ‘that guy’.

ALSO MARTIN

Yeah, and all his many, many problems.

MARTIN

Fine.

ALSO MARTIN

But also, you know that’s not what I’m talking about. It’s this, this fantasy that you have, that whatever you find at the top of the Panopticon is just going to **solve** everything.

MARTIN

I don’t –

ALSO MARTIN

You do though. You daydream about it! The big climactic showdown with Elias, and then the two of you kiss, and push a button that just magically saves the world and makes everything better.

MARTIN

It’s actually not a button, so –

ALSO MARTIN

Stop. Deflecting.

MARTIN

[Angry] S-So what, okay? We should just give up? Hmm? Just stay here and curl up into a ball and just accept the world as is? Hmm? That's your big solution?

ALSO MARTIN

I'm saying there **aren't** any easy solutions. We have **no** idea what's going to happen. Even if we make it to the tower, we don't know there'll be a fix. And if by some miracle there is, we both know the price will be awful. Just look at Melanie.

MARTIN

I –

[A RESIGNED SIGH]

ALSO MARTIN

We are completely out of our depth. We're responsible for everyone everywhere, and we have no idea what we're doing. The last thing we need is self-indulgent guilt on top of that.

MARTIN

I can be a real manipulative prick, you know that?

ALSO MARTIN

Oh, yeah.

[PAUSE FOR REFLECTION]

[MARTIN FINISHES HIS CUPPA]

MARTIN

[Grimly] Tea.

Please.

[FLASK IS UNSCREWED AGAIN]

[TEA SOUNDS ENSUE]

So, this price. What do you think?

Are we going to have to kill John?

ALSO MARTIN

I don’t know because you don’t know. But it seems like something we should at least consider.

MARTIN

I… have thought about it. And… I won’t. I don’t think I could.

ALSO MARTIN

Mmhmm.

MARTIN

But anything else? *Any* other price? I'll pay it.

ALSO MARTIN

Even dying?

MARTIN

Yeah!

ALSO MARTIN

John's as bad as we are. He wouldn't let it happen.

MARTIN

It's not his decision.

ALSO MARTIN

Fine. So flip that round, then. What are you going to do when he tries to sacrifice himself, because you *know* he's going to try?

MARTIN

I don't know, all right? I don't know.

ALSO MARTIN

And that's okay for now, but I just want us to have thought about

this stuff properly before it comes up. Because even if that's not it, chances are it'll be something else you don't want to do, and we need to make a proper choice. We can't just react out of shame or fear or whatever.

MARTIN

What, like with Peter and Elias?

ALSO MARTIN

Yes.

MARTIN

That was a proper choice?! I chose wrong!

ALSO MARTIN

But you *made* a decision. Your own decision. Regardless of the outcome.

MARTIN

I… I'll think about it.

ALSO MARTIN

We'll think about it.

MARTIN

Sure.

[ANOTHER SIGH, ANOTHER SIP]

What about the people here?

ALSO MARTIN

What people?

MARTIN

I don't know. My… 'prisoners', I guess?

ALSO MARTIN

What about them?

MARTIN

Why haven't we talked about them?

ALSO MARTIN

Because you didn't want to think about them. So, we didn't.

MARTIN

Yeah? Well, I want to now. Consider it a 'proper choice' if you like.

ALSO MARTIN

Okay.

MARTIN

Can I see them?

ALSO MARTIN

No. This place is about hidden, unnoticed suffering.

MARTIN

I can feel them, though.

ALSO MARTIN

Sure, you're aware of it, dimly. A sort of far-off, lonely terror. But there's no way for us to actually see or hear them.

MARTIN

Hmm. But… if this is *my* domain, can I fix that? Like, can I change things?

ALSO MARTIN

If you wanted to start actively tormenting them, I'm sure this place would oblige. But 'fixing' things? Making it easier on them, or freeing them… probably not.

MARTIN

Fine.

…

Can you tell me about them?

ALSO MARTIN

I can. Deep down, we do know what's happening to them.

MARTIN

Do we know who they are?

ALSO MARTIN

We never met them in the old world. Although one of them *is* named Tim. Just a coincidence, I think, unless it was a subconscious thing on our part.

MARTIN

Tell me. Please. Like John would.

ALSO MARTIN

Why? Just so you can torture yourself?

MARTIN

I want to know the exact limits of my guilt.

ALSO MARTIN

Fair enough.

ALSO MARTIN (STATEMENT)

I can't tell you their names, because we don't know them. Who they are, who they were – these details are lost to us. But they're also

lost to them. Sometimes they get flashes, moments of people they might have been. Phantom pasts, the ghosts of happy futures. But they're empty, and vanish if they try to hold them.

One of them is young, though he has always felt old. He has always felt tired. He has stood apart from everyone who ever cared for him and never felt the distance. His family were cold, and so to keep that coldness at bay, he built a towering wall between them and him. He hid it in jokes and practiced smiles, but on a cloudy day, they could see it. And when he was able to leave his family behind, that wall came with him, following him, keeping out the world.

He would walk the streets of the city at night and wish the world away, so it could be just him, with no-one to know him or judge him or hurt him. Sometimes, when the emptiness inside began to bite, he reached out for people, and took a friend or a lover. But when he did, it was only to watch them beat themselves again and again against that wall, until they finally relented, and he was alone once more. He told himself it was for the best. He told himself he liked it like that.

And now he is here. The wall still surrounds him, though now it encircles all the fields where he staggers, wet from the rain, and cold from the wind. He calls out for somebody to see him, for somebody to *know* how achingly hollow he is. He walks and walks and walks, desperate for another voice, for someone to know where he is and what he's going through. But he can't shout too loud. If he does, he feels the thick grey mulch rising from where it has settled in the hollow of his chest. It pushes up his throat and streams from

his mouth instead of words. It is clouded and so bitterly cold that where it lands, the scrubland grass turns brittle and crumbles away, leaving only ice, pulled from the deepest parts of him, hardened and crusted into a smooth, dark mirror, reflecting his lined and careworn face against the clouded sky. The rain pricks his skin, though there is no comfort in it. Because he knows he can never be warm and dry again. The wall is too high.

But still he keeps walking, keeps crying out, though quieter now. Nobody knows he's here, and if they did, they wouldn't care. He has driven them all away, kept them so far from who he is that there is no-one now to see his suffering. No-one who cares.

He falls to his knees, icy mud clinging to his legs, soaking through his threadbare trousers as tears and rain fall from his cheeks in equal measure. Next to him, a woman lies on her side, curled tight around herself, head tucked to her chest. He does not see her, cannot hear her wracking sobs, so close to his. She could reach out her hand, touch his arm, his face, his heart… and would feel nothing. Neither would ever know. Because at their core they are alone, and nothing can release them from that absolute knowledge.

She stands, legs shaking from the cold and from the effort, her muscles locked in place, and joints protesting at the shift. How long has she been lying there? How long have the fingers of despair locked around her throat? She doesn't know, and she feels in her bones that no one else does, either. Nobody knows she's here, and she misses them all.

She tries to picture her friends. A warm and smiling procession of faces, a technicolour memory that only makes the iron grey sky that much duller, the misty drizzle that much colder on her face. What is she recalling? There was music once, lights, laughter. A birthday, maybe, or a pub lunch? They sat around, on old chairs, comfortable chairs in the warm. The taste of wine was on her tongue, and her mouth was curled into a smile. The carefree chatter of her friends surrounded her and soothed her. Or did it?

She wasn't talking, wasn't engaged with any of the bright and happy people. Her smile was fixed and deliberate, and it didn't quite match her eyes. She was among this joy, yes, these sparkling friends, but she was not a part of it, not really. She tried to be, wanted so desperately to be a part of their easy warmth, and maybe they thought she was. But they hadn't known her, not really. They hadn't seen the empty ice that filled her, that kept her apart from them, that she desperately tried to thaw with each and every friendly face that smiled at her.

The memory fades, and she shivers as her mind returns to the rain and the wind, tinged with the sting of salt, and the slight stench of rotten seaweed, though there was no ocean here. She feels the ice within her still, and knows she never found anyone to melt it. And now? She never will. Those who tried, she gripped so tightly that they couldn't breathe, and so she lost them anyway. Now nobody remembers her name. If they should stumble upon an old photograph, some half-remembered birthday party that still brings up a smile, and then see her face, sat there amongst the revellers,

they will frown, just for a moment, as they try to remember her name. Then they will shrug, and forget they were even curious. They will not think to wonder about her.

And it is this that she is so deeply afraid of. Not the ache of her flesh from the bitter cold, not the cloying dampness of the rain, or the crushing fatigue from uncounted days or weeks or years without sleep. It is the sure knowledge that nobody remembers her existence enough to even wonder idly where she might be, or to ponder at her suffering.

She screams her fear to the open air, but none beside her hear it.

MARTIN

Thank you.

ALSO MARTIN

I'm sorry. I know it's hard.

MARTIN

Yeah.

ALSO MARTIN

So? What are we thinking?

MARTIN

I'm thinking that I didn't ask for this. It's not my fault they're here.

ALSO MARTIN

True.

MARTIN

But I can't keep existing like this at their expense. It's not… it's not right. Whatever happens with Elias, W-with the rest of the world… I can't live on the misery of others.

ALSO MARTIN

They'll suffer either way.

MARTIN

I get it, okay? I can't decide what happens to them. But… I just might be able to decide what happens to me. And… And if it comes down to it…

I'll get John to destroy me like the others.

ALSO MARTIN

You don't really believe he'd do it?

MARTIN

I don't know. Maybe?

ALSO MARTIN

…

This took a dark turn.

MARTIN

Yeah. But… this time, it doesn't feel like despair.

It feels like resolve.

ALSO MARTIN

Well, hopefully it won't come to that.

MARTIN

Hopefully.

[MARTIN SIPS REFLECTIVELY]

Thanks for the tea.

ALSO MARTIN

We're welcome.

MARTIN

Ha.

[FLASK IS RESEALED WITH THE LID]

So, how do I leave?

ALSO MARTIN

I think we just keep walking.

MARTIN

And John?

[BAG IS ZIPPED UP]

ALSO MARTIN

I kind of expected him to have interrupted already.

MARTIN

I'm sure he'll find us eventually.

[FOOTSTEPS HEAD OFF]

[CLICK]

MAG187 - Checking Out

Statement ########-27

[CLICK]

[A HARSH WIND BLOWS AS FOOTSTEPS ON GRAVEL APPROACH]

[THE ARCHIVIST SIGHS]

[A TANNOY CRACKLES INTO LIFE PLAYING HOTEL MUZAK BEHIND HELEN'S WORDS COMING OVER THE SPEAKER]

HELEN

So are you going to knock or what?

ARCHIVIST

Perhaps I was just enjoying a quiet moment before you arrived.

HELEN

Yeah… Bit rude to do it on my doorstep, though, isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

Perhaps. My apologies.

HELEN

So, where's the old ball and chain? Surely you're not paying me a visit on your lonesome?

ARCHIVIST

I am.

[DEEP INTAKE OF BREATH]

You gambled right.

HELEN

I'm sure I don't know *what* you mean.

ARCHIVIST

You hoped that by nudging us past his domain, Martin would still be there when I arrived… so I would have to pass through on my own. Apparently, you were right.

HELEN

I thought you said you **weren't** going to look inside people's heads?

ARCHIVIST

I thought you said you weren't people.

HELEN

Touché.

ARCHIVIST

Well, for what it's worth, I have tried not to look inside you.

HELEN

Oh yes?

ARCHIVIST

I maybe glimpse a motive, sometimes, but I try not to stare.

HELEN

I'm touched. Any particular reason for this monumental restraint?

ARCHIVIST

The same reason you don't want Martin here. I wasn't sure I wanted to kill you, and… you don't want to die.

HELEN

…

He's still so new to all of this, caught up in ideas of justice and 'solving' things. Sure, he can wave away the theoretical idea of people suffering…

ARCHIVIST

But if he sees it up close, he might try to get his boyfriend to smite

you?

HELEN

Something like that. We've built up such a rapport, he and I. I'd hate to strain it over such a *temporary* disagreement. I'm just concerned for his happiness, you understand.

ARCHIVIST

Completely.

HELEN

I am a little bit surprised you didn't follow him?

ARCHIVIST

He didn't want me to.

I didn't need special powers to know that. When he crossed the threshold I had to make a choice, and –

HELEN

– and you chose me.

ARCHIVIST

Let's say you were something of a branching path.

HELEN

Hm. Always the flatterer.

So, when *is* he coming out the other side?

ARCHIVIST

It might take a while.

HELEN

Mmm, yeah, these quiet reflective domains sometimes do. Ah well, more time for us to hang out, I suppose. Shoot the breeze, share some hot goss…

ARCHIVIST

Excuse me while I try to contain my joy.

HELEN

You are excused. So…

[A DOOR CREAKS OPEN]

…are you coming?

ARCHIVIST

I thought we agreed I'm far too all-powerful to cross your threshold?

HELEN

Don't flatter yourself. This isn't some extension, some limb reaching

out to snatch the wayward or the trusting. This domain, this magnificent building, **is** me.

[HELEN STRETCHES AND SIGHS CONTENTEDLY AS THE BUILDING DOES LIKEWISE]

You're welcome here. We'll be quite safe with you travelling through me. As long as neither of us does anything *silly*.

[STATIC CRACKLE FROM THE ARCHIVIST]

Or you could just stand there glowering. That's fine too.

ARCHIVIST

I'm trying to 'know' if there's another route I can take.

HELEN

And?

ARCHIVIST

Turns out there is, actually. But it is rather full of spiders.

[STATIC FADES AND FOOTSTEPS START WALKING AWAY]

HELEN

Oh, don't be such a sourpuss.

[FOOTSTEPS STOP, FOLLOWED BY A SIGH]

It'll be fun. I promise.

[AN EVEN HEAVIER SIGH FOLLOWS]

ARCHIVIST

Alright.

[FOOTSTEPS ON GRAVEL UNTIL THE ARCHIVIST CROSSES HELEN'S THRESHOLD, AND THE DOOR CREAKS SHUT EERILY]

[THE PIANO MUZAK CONTINUES AS HE ENTERS A HOTEL CORRIDOR. HELEN'S VOICE COMES FROM ALL AROUND]

HELEN

Oooh! *[Shudders]* It feels different… to last time.

ARCHIVIST

Different how?

HELEN

The tape recorder feels more, um… awake.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Oh, joy. Come on.

[STATIC RISES AGAIN AS HIS FOOTSTEPS START]

[HELEN REACTS AS IF HAVING EATEN SOMEONE FOUL]

HELEN

Ooh… Eeeeeeurgh!

ARCHIVIST

What?

HELEN

Eurgh. You just – blergh… You just *knew* the way through, well, me. And, eurgh, it's not a pleasant feeling. No. I do not like that. Not at all.

ARCHIVIST

Well, tough. I'm not going to trust you to be my guide.

HELEN

[Exasperated] Would it kill you?

ARCHIVIST

It's killed plenty of others.

[THE ARCHIVIST CONTINUES WALKING AS HOTEL SOUNDS ECHO AROUND]

[THE BUILDING CREAKS AS HELEN'S VOICE CHANGES RESONANCE AGAIN]

HELEN

You really don't like me, do you?

ARCHIVIST

No.

HELEN

And you never have.

ARCHIVIST

Not really.

HELEN

Even though I saved you from Michael.

ARCHIVIST

You *were* Michael.

HELEN

Argh. I'm The Distortion, as was Michael, but I am not him, and never have been. Surely you know all this by now, what with your shiny new eye powers?

ARCHIVIST

It's not about what I know. It's about what I feel.

HELEN

[Disparagingly] Oh, what do you feel?

ARCHIVIST

I *liked* Helen.

HELEN

I **am** Helen.

ARCHIVIST

The real one.

HELEN

…

Helen-Classic.

ARCHIVIST

Sure.

HELEN

But that doesn't make any sense. You barely met her. You had half an hour together, and she spent most of that ranting about mazes!

She was positively *delirious* with paranoia!

ARCHIVIST

True. But as you'll recall, I was pretty paranoid myself at that point.

HELEN

So what? You *saw* yourself in her? A sad reflection? A possible future?

ARCHIVIST

Maybe.

HELEN

Oh, John! This existence can be wonderful, if you just let it.

ARCHIVIST

[Sadly] I know.

[HE CONTINUES TO WALK]

HELEN

For what it's worth, I really don't think you would have liked her. If you'd known her better, I mean.

ARCHIVIST

No?

HELEN

You haven't looked into Helen-Classic's past yet? You should try it. I don't think you'll like what you find.

ARCHIVIST

What? Lying to real estate clients? Bit of a prick at parties? Secret Tory?

HELEN

Yes.

To all of them, actually.

ARCHIVIST

And that's the problem. I could have grown to dislike her, but… you made sure that sort of thing could never happen. Now you use her form, see her mind, but they're just… tools. Michael had nothing you could use but a razor-straight desire for vengeance, but you saw something in Helen that would work on me much more subtly. So you took her. And I'll never get to dislike her.

I'm stuck disliking you instead.

HELEN

At least I care enough to bother.

ARCHIVIST

That’s true, I suppose.

[THE KNOWING STATIC RISES AGAIN]

HELEN

Oh. Blergh. Please stop doing that.

ARCHIVIST

I’ll stop doing it when I’m confident you’re taking me the right way.

HELEN

I am!

[STATIC FADES]

ARCHIVIST

The quickest way.

HELEN

Eurgh. Fine.

[THE CORRIDOORS SHIFT IN CRUNCHING WOOD AND BRICK]

[A DOOR CREAKS OPEN]

ARCHIVIST

So tell me. Why *are* we going the long way? You just trying to keep me from meeting any victims? Or are you trying to figure out if there's still a way you can destroy me?

HELEN

…

A bit of both, to be honest.

ARCHIVIST

I see. How long have you been working with Elias?

HELEN

I'm not.

ARCHIVIST

[Faux-shocked] Helen! Is that… a lie?

HELEN

No! No, it's not. I don't know him. I've never even – Look, I'm happy here, all right? This world is fabulous, and I don't want you to end it all because you've got a chip on your shoulder.

ARCHIVIST

So you think I can turn the world back?

HELEN

I think you're bloody minded and stubborn, and I won't underestimate you.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

HELEN

And for all his bleeding heart, Martin's just as bad. Worse, even, in some ways.

ARCHIVIST

[Fondly] Yes, he is.

HELEN

You are so difficult to like sometimes. I've been nothing but nice to you.

ARCHIVIST

Maybe that's why I never trusted you.

HELEN

See? So rude.

ARCHIVIST

Or maybe it's because you're an embodiment of the fear of lies and delusion.

HELEN

Also rude.

[THE ARCHIVIST MAKES A SMALL NOISE OF DISCOMFORT]

ARCHIVIST

Could you, uh… sorry, could you manifest a room for me? Please.

HELEN

Why?

ARCHIVIST

So I can make a statement?

HELEN

You do realise it's all me, right? If I make a room, I'll still hear you? Because I'd **be** the room?

ARCHIVIST

Fine, I just thought – never mind.

[DEEP BREATH AS STATIC RISES]

[HOTEL SOUNDS NOW INCLUDE FAINT PEOPLE SOUNDS AS WELL, AND THE UNDERLYING SOUNDS OF RAGGED, HURRIED BREATHS]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I wander through the corridors, quickly, footsteps hurrying, spurred on by the worries that chase me. What were the directions she'd said, that smiling, friendly woman in reception? Left, right, right, right, left, straight ahead, then down the stairs. No, no, no, that can't be it because I just went left and it's a dead end. Well, not a dead end. It's a door that says 'Honeymoon Suite'.

HELEN

[Saucy] Currently unoccupied…

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I turn to retrace my steps. I must have taken a wrong turn.

HELEN

Just in case you and Martin were looking for a room.

[DOOR KNOCKING AND RATTLING SOUNDS NOW INTERSPERSE THE STATEMENT]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

How long… How long has Alex been alone now? On his own? Hours at least. And he's only… Four? Five? It doesn't matter, all that matters is I can picture his face, and he's alone and scared without me. How could I leave my son alone in a place like this? How could I do it?

HELEN

Deadbeat mum. Classic.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

None of the doors have numbers on them, no way to know if they're mine, even if I hadn't lost my keys. I, I bang on each in turn and shout his name. I try the handles even though my palms ache from the blisters. Wait, blisters? How many doors have I tried?

HELEN

[Faux-concern] Oh, I'm sure it'll be the next one.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

A flash of movement up ahead. It's a woman. Do I… recognise her? She looks so friendly, with her wide, happy smile and her cheery voice. I tell her I need to find my son, I… I need to check out. Of course, of course, she tells me. She can help. She'd love nothing more than to help me, although she does hate to see me check out, it's always so hard on her when guests leave.

HELEN

I like her!

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

She takes me by the arm and leads me down a narrow service staircase. As we near the bottom I hear a distant cry. Alex. I start to

run, but she says no need to rush. Check-out lasts all day. That's good to know. My arm is bleeding… When did I cut it? It's okay, she has some bandages. I'm so lucky she's here.

She bandages my arm, and it starts to bleed even more. Something's wrong here. There's something behind her smile. I look away. The dull blue paint of the staircase is gone but… I recognise the wallpaper… Where have I seen this wallpaper before?

HELEN

Nowhere special.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

The corridor? I'm – No, we were on the stairs. Did we leave? No this isn't right, it isn't fair. I've got to – Wait, where is she? She was lying. Was she? She led me here, but now she's gone and I'm… I'm so tired. When did I sleep last? No, I-I can't sleep, I've got to find my son. Just keep moving, there's only so many rooms. He has to be in one of them. Just push on, even if you have to check them all.

Ignore the blood you're dripping on the carpet. Ignore the mirrors that try to tell you how haggard you're growing. Ignore the laughter and the smiling and the chatter that has followed you since the reception. When did you go to reception? You can't picture it.

HELEN

Shame, it's very tasteful. There's *ferns*.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Wait. What is that? That sound. It's… It's not her, not just her. There's someone else. A man's voice, you think. Droning on, and rising and falling as he talks and talks and talks…

[STATIC RISES AGAIN]

HELEN

Ah… Ah.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Up there, just around the corner. I can hear them. I can hear them. There!

VICTIM

Oh, oh thank god! Please, do you know where room 288 is? I… My son, he's, I don't know how long he's been in there on his own, and I need to find him –

ARCHIVIST

Look, I'm so sorry. But… there is no room 288.

VICTIM

But my son!

[HELEN MANIFESTS, SMILINGLY]

HELEN

– Is around here somewhere. Come on, let's have a look together!

VICTIM

Oh, brilliant, oh thank you, thank you so much!

HELEN

Now, where did you see him last?

VICTIM

Uh, okay. It was… it was room… wait, wait hang on.

ARCHIVIST

She's lying to you. She isn't your friend.

VICTIM

I… wait. I, I know you. You're that woman from reception.

HELEN

John, this isn't your business.

VICTIM

You were laughing! You were laughing when I got lost.

HELEN

Listen, John, I don't come up and tell you how to pull horror from

people's brains, do I?

[THE VICTIM IS TALKED OVER AS HELEN AND THE ARCHIVIST ARGUE]

VICTIM

Please, please, I need… I need some directions.

ARCHIVIST

You *do,* a bit, actually, yes.

VICTIM

This place, it's such a maze…

HELEN

Well, okay, that's… that's fair.

VICTIM

I don't know how long I've been here.

ARCHIVIST

Look. I'm so sorry –

VICTIM

You've got to help me!

ARCHIVIST

[Angrily] Don't touch me!

[THE ARCHIVIST PULLS AWAY, AS THE VICTIM FALLS AND IS CRYING]

HELEN

Oopsie. Not so easy, is it? Keeping up your humanity?

VICTIM

[Pleadingly] I'm sorry… It's just my son…

ARCHIVIST

I could make her an avatar.

HELEN

Huh…

[THE CORRIDOORS SHIFT]

Hmmm. Best not.

[A DOOR SLAMS. ONE LAST CRY FROM THE VICTIM AS SHE VANISHES, ALONG WITH HELEN]

ARCHIVIST

Sending her away? I must have hit a nerve.

[HELEN'S VOICE RETURNS TO BEING EVERYWHERE]

HELEN

Got *on* my nerves. Not the same thing.

ARCHIVIST

If you say so.

HELEN

…

So, what happens now?

ARCHIVIST

You mean, did the sight of a poor, innocent wretch suffering by your hand convince me that you need to be destroyed?

HELEN

Pretty much.

ARCHIVIST

No.

You were right. It probably was something that would have convinced Martin it needed to be done.

HELEN

But…

ARCHIVIST

But I already knew what I would see in here. I already knew what I had to do.

HELEN

Because you've grown so fond of your old pal Helen? Or because… you were already going to destroy me?

…

I see.

ARCHIVIST

I was hoping I was wrong about you.

HELEN

You've **always** known what I am.

ARCHIVIST

Yes. But I'm only recently realising just how dangerous you are.

HELEN

Of course I'm dangerous, John. I'm a monster, just like you. and you can't kill all of us.

ARCHIVIST

No. You're dangerous because for all the torture and cruelty, you still somehow got us to think you're our friend.

HELEN

I am your friend.

ARCHIVIST

No. You're not. That's just what you distort. It's why you spin, but you never quite lie. The corridors, the warped body, it's all just set dressing, isn't it? It's not the reality of what you actually are.

HELEN

And what, actually, am I?

ARCHIVIST

You're a question.

HELEN

"What lurks behind the door?"

ARCHIVIST

To some. But that would be The Stranger or The Dark. No, you are the question of "What lurks behind a smile?" Is a friendship true, or is it reaching out with hands that cut you?

HELEN

Oh, I see. Very good.

ARCHIVIST

Even I didn't see it properly, not at first. Not until the tunnels, when you wouldn't help. When you laughed.

HELEN

Oh, come on. That wasn't a deception, that was barely a betrayal!

ARCHIVIST

You worked to hurt us and help us, all with the same smile, until we can barely tell one from the other. Keeping us off-balance, constantly second-guessing our own opinions of you. Never quite crossing a line we could never forgive, but never putting yourself on the line either. And when one face finally stopped smiling, you just changed the face.

HELEN

Fine. So if that's all true… why? Why would I do any of that? What's my actual motive?

ARCHIVIST

I don't think you even have one. It's just what you are.

HELEN

Oh, well done. Very poetic.

ARCHIVIST

But none of that actually matters. What matters is that you want the world to stay as it is. And I don't know if we can change it back, but if there is *any* possibility, you will try and stop us. And when you do, I can't think of anyone more dangerous.

HELEN

Oh, give over! You're the most powerful thing in the world. *[Placatingly]* What could I possibly do?

ARCHIVIST

It's not me I'm worried about.

HELEN

Eurgh, fine. I thought this might happen.

ARCHIVIST

Ceaseless Watch– aargh!

[CREAKING AS THE CORRIDOORS FLEX AND CONSTRICT]

HELEN

Want to try that again?

ARCHIVIST

Ceasel–

[MORE FLEXING]

HELEN

[Darkly] You are inside my domain now, Archivist. I can shift any part of myself to any corner of this wonderful hell **you** have built for us. By the time the Eye focuses on me, I'm already somewhere new, something new.

[DOORS OPEN]

ARCHIVIST

Ceaseless –

[ANOTHING WARNING SHIFT]

HELEN

Whoopsie!

ARCHIVIST

You can't do this forever!

HELEN

In this brave new world? I'm afraid I **very** much can.

ARCHIVIST

You can't kill me, though. You're just stalling.

HELEN

True. But hopefully I can stall long enough that any of your little gang that can die, have done so. By the time I let you out, you'll have nobody else.

ARCHIVIST

…

I **will** end you.

[SILENCE BUT FOR SOME CREAKING]

What, nothing? No smirk? A laugh? I've got you rattled.

HELEN

I'm not scared of you.

ARCHIVIST

Helen… Was that… a lie?

HELEN

[Too quickly] No!

ARCHIVIST

A lie. A genuine untruth. Like a little bit of loose thread, flitting in the breeze.

HELEN

Fine. You can go.

[SHIFTING, AND A NEW DOOR OPENS]

There's the door. Just go!

ARCHIVIST

Ceaseless Watcher!

HELEN

No!

[THROUGH THE INCANTATION, THE HARSH BUZZ OF STATIC MINGLES WITH CREAKING WOODWORK AND CRUMBLING CRICK]

ARCHIVIST

See this lie, this golden strand of falsehood. Take it in your gaze and pull it, follow through its curves and twists and knots as it unravels all before you.

HELEN (BACKGROUND)

No. No! No! No, Archivist! Stop! John, it's me, it's Helen. It's me. I've *always* been your friend. Don't do this to me. I have always helped you. I have *always* helped you and lent you doors. Think of all that I have done for you. If you do this, everyone inside me is dead!

ARCHIVIST

Unweave it now, its fear and its falsehood, its hidden teeth and the ones it wears so proudly.

HELEN (BACKGROUND)

You're no different – You are **no** different from me! You can't save **anyone!**

ARCHIVIST

Take all that it is and all that it has. It is yours!

HELEN

No! NOOOOOO!

[HELEN'S VOICE IS STRETCHED AND VANISHED]

[EXTENDED SOUNDS OF DISTORTED DEMOLITION]

ARCHIVIST

Urgh!

[A STRANGE SOUND RINGS OUT AS THE ARCHIVIST REAPPEARS IN THE WASTELAND]

MARTIN

Christ, John!

ARCHIVIST

[Groggy] Oh, Martin! Good.

MARTIN

Wh– Wh-wh-what… What happened? Th-th-there was the hotel and then…

ARCHIVIST

I, um… I killed Helen.

MARTIN

Oh.

Why?

ARCHIVIST

Long story. Ish. I'll explain later.

MARTIN

Alright. And you couldn't wait until you were outside?

ARCHIVIST

Not really.

MARTIN

Fair enough.

ARCHIVIST

How are you? How was… your domain?

MARTIN

Oh. Well. I mean, it feels sort of underwhelming now, to be honest. Er, more of a gentle journey of self-discovery, really. I-I didn't realise I'm quite so… argumentative.

ARCHIVIST

I mean…

MARTIN

Y-y-you don't need to comment.

ARCHIVIST

Alright.

MARTIN

So…

Helen's gone, then?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[FOOTSTEPS SQUELCH AS THEY PICK THEIR WAY FORWARD]

MARTIN

Damn.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

MARTIN

Time to mourn?

ARCHIVIST

You can if you want.

…

Do you? Want to mourn?

MARTIN

…

A bit, I guess. I-I mean, she was our friend. Sort of. A bit. Until you killed her. Which I'm sure you had to do.

ARCHIVIST

Take some time if you need. But not too long.

MARTIN

Why the sudden rush?

ARCHIVIST

You see that over there?

MARTIN

Yeah?

ARCHIVIST

That's London.

[CLICK]

MAG188 – Centre of Attention

Statement ########-28

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS, AS A DISTANT DOG BARKS]

MARTIN

How much longer? Feels like we've been walking through suburbs forever.

ARCHIVIST

Well, quite.

MARTIN

Ah. Right. Okay. Literal suburban hellscape, then?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Endless, cookie-cutter housing. Impersonal, alienating. A common expression of The Lonely even before the world went to hell.

MARTIN

I guess.

Seems a bit, I don't know… a bit tame compared to some of the other stuff, though.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, not to be, uh… That isn't exactly a surprise, is it? That The Lonely seems comfortable to you?

MARTIN

Guess not.

ARCHIVIST

But if you think there's a lack of violence or suffering, then I'm afraid you're mistaken. There's plenty, it's just… hidden. Trapped behind identical doors and down silent streets of unknown neighbours. The suffering here is deep. And it's private.

MARTIN

O-Okay, yeah, I get it. So, I guess we're looking for an empty house? Somewhere to… 'unburden yourself'?

ARCHIVIST

Actually no. Helen – Th-The Distortion, turns out that was… a lot of fear for the Eye. And, uh…

MARTIN

You're still full?

ARCHIVIST

I suppose that's one way to put it.

MARTIN

…

You still haven't really explained what happened there.

ARCHIVIST

She tried to trap me in the corridors, so I destroyed her.

MARTIN

Yeah, I, I know, but, I mean… why?

ARCHIVIST

Probably because I told her I was going to kill her.

MARTIN

Yeah, that'd do it. Was it that bad in there?

ARCHIVIST

There were a lot of people suffering.

MARTIN

But that's not why you did it.

ARCHIVIST

She was… She was too dangerous. She was only ever playing us.

MARTIN

So all that talk of wanting to be friends, she was just, what, lying?

ARCHIVIST

No… That was real. She did want to be friends. But she also wanted us suspicious, off-balance, uncomfortable. She *wanted* to be able to hurt us.

MARTIN

Bit of a contradiction, surely?

ARCHIVIST

Is it? She wanted to be our friend, she just didn't want to be a good friend.

MARTIN

Huh. She couldn't help what she was, I guess.

ARCHIVIST

She didn't even try.

MARTIN

I hope the others don't take it too hard. Melanie was pretty close to

her at one point. Assuming Melanie's still alive, of course.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. I thought you and Helen got on well, though?

MARTIN

Yeah, I… I dunno, really. She always seemed to know just the right thing to say, or the wrong thing, kind of. Like, sh-she had a way of getting into your head and making you feel like you didn't know what the deal was. Like, like you were being stupid or something.

ARCHIVIST

Sounds about right.

MARTIN

Plus, I… I was a little bit jealous as well.

ARCHIVIST

Of what?

MARTIN

Of Helen. Well, the real Helen. I found the tape when you were on the run and… I don't know. Something about the way you two seemed to *connect* when she came in.

ARCHIVIST

Before she was eaten by a door.

MARTIN

Well, Yeah. It certainly seemed to have a pretty deep impact on you.

ARCHIVIST

It did. I think… I mean, you remember how I was back then, how paranoid. The Not!Sasha was there, and I could sense something wasn't right, but I just couldn't place it. It left me a suspicious wreck. Then when Helen Richardson came in, it seemed like… she was in the same place I was, but worse, further along. I thought, maybe if I could help her, that would mean… maybe I wasn't beyond help?

MARTIN

…

I'm sorry for how it worked out.

ARCHIVIST

Me too.

MARTIN

Was there any of the original Helen left in there?

[THE ARCHIVIST EXHALES WITH UNCERTAINTY]

ARCHIVIST

If there was I could never see it properly. I know that Helen Richardson was gone. The same way Michael Shelley was gone. I know The Distortion was neither of them. I also know that The Distortion of Helen was not the same being as The Distortion of Michael. But they were all so twisted up as a direct part of The Spiral. It's like, I could follow the knowledge of any one line of identity, but as soon as I tried to take a step back and see the whole, the picture… changed.

I want to believe that thing was just wearing Helen Richardson like a mask. That I finally avenged her.

MARTIN

…

A-At least we'll have plenty to tell the others when we meet up.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. Yeah we will.

MARTIN

Speaking of. How's Basira doing? Where is she, at the moment?

[STATIC OF KNOWING]

ARCHIVIST

She's trying to catch her breath in a labyrinth of masks. She hates The Stranger, but has overcome it before, and will do so again. Her path is slow and painful, but she hasn't fallen yet.

MARTIN

Thanks. I'm, I'm trying not to worry about her.

ARCHIVIST

I know.

[FOOTSTEPS CONTINUE APACE]

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Hold on.

MARTIN

What?

[WALKING STOPS]

ARCHIVIST

We're about to enter London proper. We should take a moment.

MARTIN

What's it like?

ARCHIVIST

It's the seat of The Eye. The other powers have small enclaves within it, but… it's going to be a lot.

MARTIN

Okay. A lot of what?

[A STEP FORWARD AND THERE IS THE CRACKLE OF DOMAIN TRANSITION]

[SUBURBIA IS REPLACED WITH THE WHIRR OF IRISES FOCUSSING, SECURITY CAMERAS WHIRRING AND THE BUZZ OF DRONES]

[The archivist steps forward and a change occurs. The quiet suburb is replaced by a towering city. Faces like the windows, staring at them, security cameras focus on them. They are immediately the centre of attention. It's Big Brother's Big Brother.]

MARTIN

Oookay. That's a lot of, um… Are they real?

ARCHIVIST

They're not people. But they *can* see us.

MARTIN

D-Do they ever leave the windows, or…

ARCHIVIST

No. They don't need to. They have a very good view.

MARTIN

And the cameras?

ARCHIVIST

I wouldn't look at them too closely.

MARTIN

I won't if they return the favour.

Okay. S-So. Do we just… start walking again?

ARCHIVIST

I don't see why not.

MARTIN

At least there aren't any cars.

[MORE WHIRRING, AS SPOTLIGHTS FLARE INTO LIFE WITH A HEAVY KA-CHONK SOUND]

ARCHIVIST

I suppose they don't get many new faces around here.

MARTIN

Especially not The Archivist. You're a celebrity!

ARCHIVIST

Maybe. Or maybe it's Elias' personal welcome wagon.

MARTIN

Oh. Hmm. Is that a possibility?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know. I still can't see him.

MARTIN

Then I guess we'll find out.

ARCHIVIST

Let's move on. I don't need to attract any *more* attention.

MARTIN

Er, yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Besides, turns out I *can* feel a statement coming on, and I'd rather

not do it with any more of an audience than absolutely necessary.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[THE ARCHIVIST'S VOICE SOUNDS MORE RESONANT FOR THESE LINES, AS IF IN A TUNNEL, THEN ADOPTS USUAL STATEMENT TONE]

ARCHIVIST

Hm. You want a show so badly?

Fine.

[STATIC RISES]

[CITY SOUNDS, INCLUDING CARS, START TO BE HEARD]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

London. Carmen hated London. She had only ever moved here because there were no jobs in her field outside of it, though right now she couldn't have told you for certain what her field actually was. When she had first arrived she had almost convinced herself she liked it, but that had worn thin very quickly, and recently the

place had changed. It felt… different.

It had always watched her; Carmen had never been under any illusions about that. Most surveilled city in the world, so much so that you didn't even notice most of the time. She would barely register the bank of CCTV monitors on the side of the bus that cycled through angles until you were staring at the side of your own head. And she had lived next to a small park for two years before she realised the huge metal pole in the middle of the pathways wasn't a streetlamp, but a bank of cameras.

She had once counted how many times she could spot a camera watching her during her morning run: thirty-one in ten minutes. At least, it had been back then. Last time she had tried it there were hundreds. They tracked her movements, and made so much noise she could not have ignored them if she tried. It was halfway between the mechanical whir of a focusing lens and the low rattle of mean-spirited laughter. Carmen didn't go running anymore.

She lay in bed now, the lights of the streetlamps below her window washing out the world in a faintly green LED glow. Her curtains had long since torn, and there was nowhere to buy any more. When she turned onto her side, she could see the blinds of the flat across the street twitching, the suggestion of an observer between the slats. Carmen turned her back to the window, tried to ignore the sense that she was being watched, being judged. Her own eyes drifted to the door to her room, and she realised it was ajar. In the gap stood her flatmate, the one whose name Carmen didn't remember, and who she couldn't recall moving in. Straight blonde

hair atop a round, friendly face that never seemed to blink.

‘It’s late,’ the flatmate said, her tone level. Carmen’s throat tightened. ‘I am trying to sleep. This is not acceptable.’

The words bit into Carmen and she felt her head swim and her heart race so fast she thought it was going to burst. What time was it? She hadn’t been making any noise, how had her flatmate known? This was her room, her space, she was allowed to be awake, she was–

Her flatmate was still there, standing in the doorway, eyes locked on her. Carmen was shaking all over, trying to keep her teeth from chattering, from making more noise that might further disturb this presence in her room. She did not sleep. And her flatmate did not move. And as the night passed, she could have sworn she heard the faintest snicker drifting from nearby windows.

[BATHROOM SOUNDS, INCLUDING THE RUNNING OF A SHOWER]

The sun came up gradually, bathing everything in the harshest of lights, every pavement crack revealed, every broken window or poorly painted façade laid bare for all to see. Carmen stared at her face in the mirror, the glow of morning reflecting back the bruised and puffy bags under her eyelids, the wrinkles that seemed to deepen every day… how many days now… and the pale weariness that almost leaked from her skin. She tried to force a smile, but her reflection just stared at her, well aware that it was false. Behind

her, she saw the face of her flatmate, that same expression that dropped a hot coal of anxiety into her stomach.

‘I am waiting for the bathroom,’ the flatmate said. ‘This is not acceptable.’

[BATHROOM SOUNDS FADE, REPLACED BY THE CREAK OF A WARDROBE]

Bile rose from Carmen’s throat for just a second as the flatmate took a step closer, watching her every move, examining her for imperfections, for failures. And there were so many. Carmen pushed past her, out of the bathroom, and ran back to her room, where she tried to find clothes for the day, but everything in her wardrobe was fit only to draw attention to her. She so desperately wanted to simply disappear, just for a moment.

[DOOR SHUTS AND IS LOCKED]

A camera swivelled to focus on her the moment she left her flat, stepping onto the landing, lens extending towards her, right at eye level. She instinctively swatted at it, batting it away.

[SOFT CRUNCH OF AN IMPACT]

It was softer than she expected, and warmer, impacting the wall with a gentle pop, and leaving a sticky grey residue behind it. Carmen hurried down the stairs as the other cameras all focused on

her, and other doors on the floor began to open to see what all the fuss was about. From the speed at which they opened, her neighbors must have been standing behind them. Waiting.

[HURRIED FOOTSTEPS ON CONCRETE, AS DOORS CREAK OPEN TO WATCH]

She took it two steps at a time going down, and almost tripped and fell twice, but it was better than the lift. The lift was nothing but cameras and mirrors, infinite reflections staring at each other out to all eternity and the endless multiplication of four cameras to watch it all forever. No, she wasn't going in the lift.

[EXTERIOR DOOR OPENS TO URBAN SOUNDS]

At last she was in the street, the air of the city close, dry and tinged with that gritty texture that always made her afraid she was going to have an asthma attack. Did she have one recently? There were memories, flashes of lying on the ground, desperate for someone, anyone, to help. But they had just watched silently. Some had taken videos. But she was here now, and she couldn't afford to have another attack today. She had somewhere very important to be.

The street outside was not crowded, which gave Carmen the briefest moment of hope. Perhaps she could make her journey in relative peace. But then the camera orb on a nearby pole swivelled to focus on her and, just like that, every single person turned towards her as one. Her stomach dropped as one by one their faces lit up, taking

on that unmistakable hue of anticipation. Of recognition. Carmen could remember none of these people, but there was no ignoring the fact that they definitely knew her and, more than that, she was *important* to them.

'Oh my god,' a young man said as she tried to walk past him, 'it's you!'

He waited for a response, but Carmen had nothing to say, and as her feet locked in place her mind could do nothing but recite her a litany of her inadequacies, her failures, her regrets. What did he want from her? His smile turned into a sneer.

'I should have known,' he spat, 'what a disappointment.'

Carmen tried to walk faster, ignoring the middle-aged woman who looked her up and down, not bothering to hide the judgement in her gaze. All she had to say was, 'Oh.'

A little girl implored for Carmen to play with her, huge eyes pleading, but she didn't have time.

'You're just like everyone said you were!' the little girl screamed as Carmen tried to walk away. 'No wonder Simone left you.'

Shut up, shut up, shut up, there's no way the child could have known that. Did someone see? Of course they did, of course they were always watching, judging, knowing all her business. and there was nothing she could do to stop it. To keep them from being disappointed, to not hurt them. She just screwed up, and they all

just watched her fall.

[A PEN CLICKS]

‘Sounds like you have the weight of the word on your shoulders,’ her therapist said, voice soft and mellifluous. The deep brown of her eyes met Carmen’s, and as always Carmen had to quiet the flutter of her heart, choke down and try her best to hide the seed of lust that had settled inside her long ago. But she was certain she saw a flash of contempt pass across her therapist’s face. She knew, she had seen.

‘It does feel like that,’ Carmen said. ‘There’s so much pressure, and I don’t know why.’

‘I know why’, the therapist said. ‘It’s because everyone’s counting on you. Everyone’s watching.’

Carmen was back in her room at last. She had no curtains, so pressed her mattress against the glass to keep out the light. To keep out the curiosity. Her door did not lock, so she pushed her unused desk against the flimsy MDF. To keep out her flatmate. At last she was alone. Nobody could see her. She could do what she liked and it would harm nobody.

So why didn’t she feel it? Why was there still that small, panicked buzzing in the back of her mind that told her something could see her. That she was not alone. Carmen managed not to scream, but couldn’t stop herself kicking the wall in frustration.

[A SERIES OF SMALL KICKS AGAINST A SOLID OBJECT]

The rage passed in a moment and shame hit her like a truck. Someone had seen that, she was sure of it, and what must they think of her?

On the section of wall she had kicked, a big chunk of plater crumbled to the floor, revealing the brick behind. Carmen's brow wrinkled, first in confusion, then in horror. Set into those bricks behind the plaster was an eye. It was larger than a human eye, and flatter, almost the size of her head, and it pulsed gently.

[VAGUELY UNPLEASANT PULSING SOUNDS CAN BE HEARD FAINTLY]

The pupil was locked on her. And all at once Carmen understood how deep it went, that they were in everything, lurking in the very fabric of the world she lived in, always keeping watch on her.

It was not in rage, but in cold fury that Carmen moved the desk and marched down to the kitchen, ignoring her flatmate's recriminations of her actions being unacceptable. She picked up a chef's knife and returned to her room, shutting the door behind her once again.

[DOOR SLAMS]

She looked at the eye, and the eye looked back.

Carmen's arm shot out, thrusting the tip of the blade right into the pupil. But it did not cut anything, for there was nothing but empty blackness. Carmen's knife, then her hand, then her forearm passed into the void of that pupil, her skin bristling with the cold.

[SQUELCHING SOUND, LIKE REACHING INTO A THICK LIQUID]

And then the iris closed around her arm, the thin flesh of the tightening muscle clenching with astonishing strength as it held her in place. Then, inch by inch by inch, it began to pull her in. But her flatmate simply shushed her.

[SOUNDS OF STRUGGLING AFTER MUSCULAR CONSTRICTION]

Her terror was pointed and crimson, and tomorrow she will wake up hating London and worrying about how many characters there are.

[ONE LAST GRUNT AND WATERY STRUGGLING, AS THE STATIC RISES AGAIN]

[THE ARCHIVIST BREATHES DEEPLY]

ARCHIVIST

Is that what you wanted to hear? Why you're all staring at me like

that? You wanted a story? Or maybe I am your chosen one and you're just waiting for your orders. I'm special to the thing upstairs, so that makes me special to all of you as well, right?

Well, let's see if I'm worthy of your attention.

[A CAMERA WHIRS]

[CLICK]

MAG189 – Peers

Statement ########-29

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS, AGAINST THE BACKGROUND HUM OF THE SURVEILLANCE ENVIRONMENT, AS THEY APPROACH THE PANOPTICON]

MARTIN

This is it, then.

ARCHIVIST

This is what?

MARTIN

Don’t play dumb.

It’s the final battle, right? We climb the tower, take out the bad guy, figure out how to change the world back, and back in time for tea.

Right?

ARCHIVIST

We’ve certainly got the audience for it.

MARTIN

Yeah. They did roll out the red carpet, didn't they? Must be nice getting the star treatment.

ARCHIVIST

I'd hardly call flooding Oxford Street with blood, the "star treatment".

MARTIN

Oh no? What would you call it?

ARCHIVIST

A very lazy metaphor.

MARTIN

Wow, you're *really* determined not to engage aren't you?

ARCHIVIST

I'm just nervous. Jonah Magnus is waiting at the top of this tower, and he obviously knows we're coming.

MARTIN

I mean, yeah, okay, but –

ARCHIVIST

And not only that, every eye in an entire city *made of nothing but*

eyes is staring at me while I try to prepare.

[AN AMUSED SNORT FROM MARTIN]

What?

MARTIN

[Amused] Seriously? Stage fright? The great Archivist, master of all he surveys can't handle a bit of public attention?

ARCHIVIST

Well, clearly not.

I'm more comfortable actually *doing* the looking.

MARTIN

[Sarcastic] Oh, I'm so sorry John, I didn't realise. God forbid you get *uncomfortable*. I guess I'll just tell everyone it's off then, shall I? We'll just go.

ARCHIVIST

You don't need to be sarcastic, okay?

MARTIN

You're right, I'm sorry. If it's any consolation, I'm scared too.

ARCHIVIST

That's what concerns me.

MARTIN

I don't follow?

ARCHIVIST

What if *our* fear is feeding him? Making him stronger?

MARTIN

But you're with The Eye too, though, right? So, maybe it's making you stronger as well.

…

John?

ARCHIVIST

[Softly] No, you're… you're right. Of course you're right. I can't believe I didn't consider it before…

MARTIN

John? Use your words.

ARCHIVIST

Me vs Elias, Jonah. We… We both draw power from The Eye.

MARTIN

Well yeah, obviously.

ARCHIVIST

No but – That – There's – I mean, if we face off, try to destroy each other, it's not like it's going to be an actual fight –

MARTIN

Hey! **Don't** talk like that, okay, we can take him!

ARCHIVIST

No, Martin, listen, what I'm saying is that whichever way you cut it, ultimately it just comes down to who The Eye *chooses*.

MARTIN

So what, it's just a, an eldritch popularity contest?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Except one of the contestants is *also* planning to try and murder the judge.

MARTIN

…

Um.

[Searchingly] Maybe it hasn't realised?

ARCHIVIST

Martin I… I don't see any way I can win this. Not now, not like this.

MARTIN

[Spluttering a bit] Well, hang on, hang on, okay, let's think about this a moment. You're making a **load** of assumptions here. You can't see inside, remember? We have **no idea** what's happening up there.

ARCHIVIST

You're right, meaning we have no idea what **he's** got planned for us.

MARTIN

[Frustrated] Yeah, but that was always going to **be** the case, wasn't it?

Wait, where are you going?

[FOOTSTEPS AS THE ARCHIVIST BACKS AWAY]

ARCHIVIST

We shouldn't have come.

MARTIN

Oh, yeah, sure! We should just go with one of all those other options that we have hidden up our sleeves, yeah?

ARCHIVIST

Martin…

MARTIN

[Growing angry] No, d-d-don't "Martin" me, okay! We're here because it's this or nothing, right?

ARCHIVIST

Right.

MARTIN

And we can't *do* nothing, right?

ARCHIVIST

Right.

MARTIN

Great. So, lead on.

…

John?

ARCHIVIST

Um.

MARTIN

Where's the door. John? How do we get inside this monstrosity?

ARCHIVIST

I, uh… Hm.

MARTIN

You don't know?

ARCHIVIST

I'm, I'm not sure.

[SOUND OF EXASPERATED MARTIN]

MARTIN

Something's probably blocking you…

ARCHIVIST

Maybe. Maybe The Eye doesn't **actually** want me in there. Or, or it's something Jonah Magnus put in place, or…

MARTIN

Or?

ARCHIVIST

Or…

MARTIN

[Sternly] Or?

ARCHIVIST

Or maybe I can't bring myself to look. Maybe I don't actually want to go inside.

MARTIN

[Harshly] For god's sake John!

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry.

MARTIN

[Suppressed anger] No it's –

[More calmly] I get it. It's fine. Maybe there's another way in? What's this thing made of anyway, like, like, obsidian or something, right?

ARCHIVIST

One-way mirrored glass.

MARTIN

Of course it is. Well, if it's just glass, then it won't be hard to break, right? We can just grab something heavy, like one of these cameras,

and then all I need…

ARCHIVIST

Oh, I wouldn't.

[MARTIN GRABS SOMETHING AND THERE IS A WET, FLESHY AND YET PNEUMATIC-LIKE SOUND]

MARTIN

Oh! Oh! Eurgh…

[MARTIN GAGS]

ARCHIVIST

[Softly] Warned you.

MARTIN

[Raging] Brilliant! Just **brilliant**!

[GLASS IS KICKED, MULTIPLE TIMES, AND SOMETHING METALLIC ROLLS AWAY]

Argh! Damnit!

ARCHIVIST

(Quietly) Martin…

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

Look, just… just give me… Let me try to focus, tune out all these watchers. I-I've got a statement to make anyway.

MARTIN

Already?

ARCHIVIST

[Tired] Yes. There's a lot here, Martin. A lot.

MARTIN

[Harshly] Fine… fine.

[More calmly] I'll do a lap of the base. See if I can find any way in through any of the bits that used to be the Institute.

ARCHIVIST

Just be careful, okay?

MARTIN

Yeah, alright. Don't worry about me.

Besides if anything happens… at least there's plenty of witnesses.

ARCHIVIST

That's not funny.

MARTIN

No.

[MARTIN SIGHS]

Be back soon.

[BRISK FOOTSTEPS AS THE SURVEILLANCE WHIRRING GETS A BIT LOUDER AND TWO SPOTLIGHTS KA-CHONK ON]

ARCHIVIST

Right, here's your bloody performance…

[STATIC RISES]

[URBAN SOUNDS, LIKE A BUSY STREET]

[FOOTSTEPS PROCEED]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

The minister hurries onwards, his eyes downcast, focusing on anything that breaks the monotony of the street. Cracks in the paving stones, boot-stomped cigarette ends, the mouldering yellow

lines that snake along the pavement's edge. Anything so that he doesn't have to meet their gaze.

[FAINT SOUNDS OF COUGHING, SHUFFLING AND CRYING PEOPLE]

The gaunt and hollow-cheeked figures that stare at him from every corner of this blighted city that might hide them from the chill. Stick-brittle women, dresses covered in second-hand blood; old men bloated from what we sold to them as food, skin discoloured from malnourishment; and the children. God, the children. They won't stop looking, won't stop following him with their piteous, desperate gaze that speaks so loudly his knees feel like they will buckle. 'Help us.'

He will. Of course he will. He wants to. He hasn't lied to them, he really hasn't. He used to be one of them, he remembers what it can be like. He is there to speak for them. And if necessary, he will join them again. The minister grips his black leather briefcase closely to his chest, bile rising in his throat at the sudden jolt of fear that races through his veins. Where did that come from? Is he afraid of it, returning, of that sharp stab of hunger, the shivering of a cold you can't escape? Or is he afraid that should it come to that, they will see him as a deceiver?

But he cannot dwell solely on his worries, he tells himself – a sentiment that his journey is proving quite inaccurate. He glances at his watch, trying to hide it from his observers so that they might

not see how expensive it is. He's late, of course. The minister is always late. There are never any taxis, you see. If he was in a car, it would be alright. Then he wouldn't have to see them, be seen by them. No, that's not the way to look at it. These are his people, it's important he stays connected to them. So why does it make him so afraid?

Before him rises the great shining glass palace, jagged and angular, clear crystal fogged and smeared with sweat and grease and breathy condensation, but still its denizens can be seen by the masses of the starving that crowd around the edges. They cannot help but look inside, begging and weeping and hissing and falling as they wait for somebody, anybody, to stop the things that kill them.

[DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES, OUTSIDE SOUNDS DISAPPEAR]

[A FEW MOMENTS SILENCE SAVE FOR FOOTSTEPS, THEN BACKGROUND CLAMOURING AND HUBBUB IS HEARD]

The minister uses the back entrance; the stale and humid air hits him immediately, the light from the not-a-sun reflected through a dozen layers of glass. The light takes on a crimson tinge as he passes an office dried with gore, and turns away from a back room where three men in fine suits laugh among themselves as they weave their pile of nooses. Time was, the minister thinks, they'd have at least put up a curtain, a token effort to hide their intentions. But now they work in full view, unafraid of what the masses outside may see. Their lies are just as transparent; there is no choice here

but to believe.

Finally, he reaches the chamber, the heart of the wretched place. Though the corridors are hard to navigate in this place of clear walls, you can always follow the sound of blustered roaring, echoing down the way. It gets louder and louder with each step, until the minister crosses the threshold into the great room, and it swallows him whole.

[THE CLAMOURING BECOMES A LOT LOUDER, A ROWDY DEBATE CHAMBER, AN INDISTINCT RABBLE]

The two sides scream and hoot and holler at each other, each on their end of the pit of sand, the arena in which they fight. The minister ignores the cobwebs in it as he makes his way to his chair. It is politer not to mention the thick layer of dust that has accumulated on the arena floor.

He takes his place, marvelling again at how comfortable the seat is, how well it seems to fit, before the memory of the eyes outside, the knowledge that he can still be seen, wipes the contented smile from his face with a jerk. He looks across the divide at his opponents: pale and gurning things that smirk and guffaw and howl. They are content and safe and happy in this place, and only scream so loud from sheer hatred of the idea that any might make noise except themselves. On their thighs can be seen the glint of gold from the great polished nails they have driven through their legs and into the chairs, gangrenous wounds that ensure they shall never have to rise

again, their position utterly secure.

On his side of the arena the shouts should be sharper, more angry, but their tone and pitch are such as to merge seamlessly with the others. There are no golden stakes on this side pinning down his would-be comrades. But the minister must be careful not to look too closely, or else he might see how many of his allies are fused to their own chairs, on which they have sat comfortable for so long.

His eyes drift away, through the walls to the crowd outside. Their baying cries for justice cannot be heard in here. If any whisper should make it through, it is utterly destroyed in the deafening shouting that surrounds him. But he cannot forget their eyes, watching him, piercing him with their wounded humanity. The minister swallows, and tries to speak over the din.

At first his words are lost, vanishing into the cacophony without a ripple, but they are words, clear and distinct from the shapeless expostulation of his peers. And as he says them, one by one the others fall silent, their disgusted attention landing on him until his own voice falters in the sudden quiet.

[GRADUALLY THE VOICES RECEDE AND THE CLAMOUR STOPS]

Across the pit the pallid things gurn at him in indignant curiosity, while on his side he is surrounded by expressions of horrified betrayal.

They can all hear him now. Any words he speaks will ring out through the chamber. He wants to talk of the people outside, the bruised and abandoned ones that suffer and die to slake their appetites. He wants to cry for restitution, for justice, for a future, for anything. But all eyes are on him and he falters. He remembers the cold, the hunger, the ache of concrete beneath him. He is afraid. And his chair is so very comfortable. The minister coughs, once, uncomfortably, and sits down.

[A BELL SOUNDS, FOLLOWED BY SCUTTLING AND SOUNDS OF CROCKERY]

As he does so the great bell tolls for dinner, and a thousand scuttering servants swarm out and into the chamber, depositing their silver trays before each seat, piled high with succulent, steaming meat.

[SOUNDS OF CONSUMPTION AND CUTLERY]

The minister eats as those outside look on, and all he tastes is salt.

[STATIC RISES, AS OTHER SOUNDS FADE, AND THE PREVIOUS ENVIRONMENT RESUMES]

MARTIN

[Brightly] All good?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Just, uh… Left a bit of a bad taste in my mouth.

MARTIN

Oh great! Fantastic!

ARCHIVIST

Martin? Wh– Something's up.

MARTIN

[Blasé] No! No, nothing's up. Everything is still awful.

ARCHIVIST

Why are you smiling?

MARTIN

I'm… just… really happy to see you.

ARCHIVIST

Martin?

MARTIN

[Loudly] Ah well! Looks like we aren't getting in here! Never mind! Better… Best head off then, eh?

ARCHIVIST

What's going on?

MARTIN

[Hissed whisper] It's fine, just trust me.

ARCHIVIST

Martin, this is the sort of place where acting strange means I will still ju–

[THE ARCHIVIST EXCLAIMS IN SHOCK AS A HATCH OPENS AND HE IS BUNDLED INSIDE, ACCOMPANIED BY A SHRIEK OF STATIC]

[HARSH METAL SCRAPE AS THE HATCH IS PULLED BACK INTO PLACE]

[THE VOCAL REVERB ON THE REST OF THE CONVERSATION INDICATES IT TAKES PLACE IN THE TUNNELS]

MELANIE

Shut up!

GEORGIE

It's alright, John. Just keep quiet.

ARCHIVIST

Wha– Georgie? Melanie? I thought – This –

MARTIN

[Whispering] Sorry. Sorry, John. Not sure how much everything up there actually understood what was going on. But, y'know, I didn't want to take any chances so it made sense to… um…

ARCHIVIST

Put on a show?

MARTIN

Yeah, basically, more or less.

GEORGIE

Martin says it's much harder for you to avoid attention up there.

MELANIE

Another reason we should have left them up there. Still. Glad you're alive and that.

ARCHIVIST

Likewise, I… oh… Ooo…

MELANIE

Oh, I know that sound. He's going pale, right? Five quid says he's about to collapse again.

ARCHIVIST

[Archly] I am not going to collapse. What do you mean again?

MELANIE

Oh come on. You do it all the time.

ARCHIVIST

[Brokenly] I do not – I'm just feeling a little bit woozy alright? I ca-can't quite think straight. Like at, um… um, Martin, you remember?

GEORGIE

Is this what you were talking about?

MARTIN

Yeah, if something messes with his connection, he can get a little… vague.

ARCHIVIST

I don't like being discussed like I'm not here.

MELANIE

Then you are going to *love* the others.

MARTIN

What others?

GEORGIE

There's a small group of… survivors we managed to pull out of some of the nearby hells. They, um… They think we're… 'special'. You know, because The Eye can't see us.

MELANIE

It's fine, Georgie. You can use the "c" word.

MARTIN

E-Excuse me?

GEORGIE

Fine. We've got, sort of a… cult.

MARTIN

Wh– Ooooh… kay…

ARCHIVIST

That's… not what I was expecting.

MELANIE

Mmhmm. It's *extremely* weird.

GEORGIE

It wasn't intentional. It just sort of happened. Although… I have to admit it can be *useful*, occasionally.

ARCHIVIST

Okay, this is, uh… this is a-a lot. Why don't we take it from the top?

GEORGIE

Alright.

ARCHIVIST

You're alive!

GEORGIE

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Good.

MELANIE

I keep telling her that technically there's no proof of that.

ARCHIVIST

I'm really glad.

MARTIN

Friendly faces have been kind of rare. Or weird.

ARCHIVIST

H-How are you here? What, what happened?

GEORGIE

When the world started to change, it just didn't hit me and Melanie. Not, not really.

MELANIE

Georgie's got that fearless thing going on, and me and The Eye, well, you remember our messy divorce.

ARCHIVIST

Sure.

GEORGIE

We figured you'd know what was going on, so we headed for the Institute, but it was, um, well, you saw it up there. We couldn't find you, and by the time we arrived the world was full nightmare.

MELANIE

There was nowhere to go back to, so I told her about the tunnels. Turns out, not only were they still here, they actually do a decent job of hiding things. When **you** aren't painting a huge target on our backs.

GEORGIE

Melanie…

MELANIE

[Sharply] What? I'm here, aren't I? I didn't say anything about being nice about it.

GEORGIE

No you didn't.

MELANIE

So… let me moan.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry to cause a fuss.

MELANIE

[Snorts] Bit late for that.

MARTIN

How did you know we were there?

GEORGIE

How could we not? The entire city knows you were there.

MELANIE

[Sarcastically] Everyone is *so* excited to see the Ceaseless Watcher's special little boy.

[GIGGLES]

ARCHIVIST

Yes, well.

GEORGIE

Always did enjoy being the centre of things.

[LAUGHS]

ARCHIVIST

So, what's next?

MARTIN

Well, I vote we catch up somewhere that's maybe not quite so close to the sinister mega-tower.

GEORGIE

Not so fast. Is it safe? If we take you to the others, is that going to put them in danger?

MARTIN

Um. Oh, er…

ARCHIVIST

No. No, I don't think it will.

MELANIE

[Intensely] I'm going to hold you to that.

GEORGIE

…

Fine. Come on then.

MARTIN

Oh, uh, er, Melanie, do you need a hand or…

MELANIE

No. No, I'm fine. Somehow managed to keep my cane through all of this.

[RATTLES CANE]

And **I** know this part of the tunnels pretty well. Besides, do you even have a torch?

MARTIN

Oh, uh, no, not anymore, we lost it when –

MELANIE

[Sharply] Then *I'm* not the one with the problem. I'm told it gets pretty dark.

[FOOTSTEPS HEAD OFF ALONG WITH CANE TAPS]

[THE ARCHIVIST CHUCKLES]

GEORGIE

Oh, and John?

ARCHIVIST

Yes?

GEORGIE

No tape recorders.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, right you are.

[CLICK]

MAG189.06 – Act III Finale Trailer

[CLICK]

[VOICES ECHO INDICATING LOCATION IN TUNNELS]

ARUN

”– turned from the bridegroom’s door.

He went like one that hath been stunned,

And is of sense forlorn:

A sadder and a wiser man,

He rose the morrow morn.”[1]

[EXHALE OF COMPLETION, ACCOMPANIED BY POLITE CLAPPING]

LAVERNE

Thank you, Arun. That was lovely.

CELIA

Hmmm.

ARUN

E-Everything alright, Celia? Not a fan of Coleridge?

UNNAMED

We have heard it a few times now.

ARUN

Yeah… well… the library is a touch limited down here.

LAVERNE

[Playfully] You want to ask them to bring back something to read from up top? Like that ‘magazine’?

[DISCOMFITED NOISES AS THEY REMEMBER THE ‘MAGAZINE’]

CELIA

[Anxious] No, it’s fine. I like the poem. I’m just… worried.

UNNAMED

They haven’t been gone long.

ARUN

You know the path that they walk. No harm can come to them.

CELIA

I know, I just… I…

LAVERNE

What is it?

CELIA

I keep hearing things. Something's going on up there. And I don't like it.

UNNAMED

I've heard it too. The city's excited about something.

LAVERNE

Not just up there…

ARUN

Laverne?

LAVERNE

I, uh, I got a bit too close to the stairs yesterday.

[ANXIOUS NOISES]

UNNAMED

[Sharply] Seriously? Did they see you?

LAVERNE

No. But… there were more watchers.

CELIA

What do you mean ‘more’? There’s two. One each side.

LAVERNE

Not anymore. I didn’t get a good look, but… there must have been about four or five.

UNNAMED

You think something’s happening?

CELIA

I don’t like it!

ARUN

Have faith! The prophets shall protect us.

UNNAMED

Like they protected Song and Christopher?

ARUN

That was our fault!

UNNAMED

Uh-huh!

ARUN

We became arrogant, attracted attention. They're the Chosen, they're not all-powerful.

CELIA

Whatever. I still don't like it, okay? I'm worried! Something's… coming. Something big. And I doubt it's friendly.

LAVERNE

Look at it this way. The world's already ended… how much worse can it be?

[CLICK]

1. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge ↩

MAG190 – Scavengers

Statement ########-30

[CLICK]

[NOTE: ALL VOICES IN THIS EPISODE CARRY THE DISTINCTIVE TUNNEL ECHO TO VARYING DEGREES]

CELIA

[Anxious] I don't like it. They've been gone too long.

LAVERNE

They're fine. Sometimes they take a while. It's hardly the longest they've been gone, is it?

CELIA

How would I know? It's not like I have a watch, is it?

LAVERNE

Then how do you know what's too long?

CELIA

How do you know what isn't?

LAVERNE

Celia… just trust them. “They walk this world above the nightmare. It will not take them.”

CELIA

Yeah, you’re right. Of course. You’re right.

[CHAIR SCRAPES, PACING STARTS]

LAVERNE

Besides, you know that they sometimes go to a side tunnel for “private contemplation”. I think it’s sweet.

CELIA

[Petulant] They can contemplate privately here…

LAVERNE

Can they? There’s not exactly many doors down here.

CELIA

No, I guess…

LAVERNE

And the tunnels do have a tendency to echo…

CELIA

Yes, alright, fine! Fine!

Excuse me for caring.

LAVERNE

We **all** care.

CELIA

Yeah… well…

[NERVOUS FIDDLING WITH SUPPLIES – BOTTLES CLINK, PAPER RUSTLES]

Laverne?

LAVERNE

Mmm?

CELIA

Has anyone been messing with the supplies?

LAVERNE

I don't think so. Why do you ask?

CELIA

There's a tape recorder here.

LAVERNE

Oh.

[Warily] Should there not be?

CELIA

I-I don't know. I haven't seen it before.

[MORE PAPER RUSTLING]

It's running.

LAVERNE

How odd.

CELIA

Yeah, I don't like th–

Hang on, listen.

[FAINT SOUNDS OF TAPPING AND FOOTSTEPS, FOLLOWED BY CLOSER STEPS AND DOOR CREAKS]

[Relieved] Oh thank god.

LAVERNE

That them?

CELIA

Yeah. And they're with a couple of new people! I don't recognise them!

LAVERNE

Well, that explains it, doesn't it?

[TAPPING IS LOUDER NOW]

CELIA

[Whispered shout] Georgie! Melanie! Over here!

ARCHIVIST

[Faint, amused] First name terms with the prophets? Bit disrespectful.

GEORGIE

[Faint] John.

ARCHIVIST

[Faint] Sorry.

[SOUNDS OF ENTRY AND SOME MUMBLING]

LAVERNE

Glad to see you're okay. We were getting worried.

ARCHIVIST

[Quiet] After you.

GEORGIE

[Teasing] Oh, were you? Both of you?

CELIA

[Plaintive] I'm allowed to care!

[FOOTSTEPS AND SMALL MOVEMENTS AS FOLKS SETTLE THEMSELVES]

GEORGIE

Where're the others?

LAVERNE

I think Arun's off writing. The rest are sleeping.

ARCHIVIST

You can sleep here?

MELANIE

You don't have to, but it does pass the time.

[MELANIE SETTLES INTO A CHAIR]

MARTIN

This place is pretty nice.

MELANIE

Yeah, I reckon it used to be a hideout of, um, you-know-who, uh, when he was living down here. It had supplies and everything.

CELIA

Sorry, we haven't been introduced, you are…?

GEORGIE

Oh, um, of course, sorry. This is –

ARCHIVIST

Jonathan. John. Sims.

MARTIN

Uh, Martin. Hello!

GEORGIE

And this is Laverne.

LAVERNE

Good to meet you.

GEORGIE

And Celia.

MARTIN

[Puzzled] Celia?

CELIA

Probably. The, um… place I was trapped in, they took my name. I never got it back. But I like Celia, so… yeah! Celia it is.

MARTIN

Uh… H-Hello… Celia.

CELIA

So, where **were** you two then?

ARCHIVIST

Er… Pardon?

CELIA

They saved you, right? From one of the nightmares? So, what was it?

ARCHIVIST

Oh…

LAVERNE

Celia, don't push. They can tell us when they're ready.

[DISCOMFITED SOUNDS FROM MARTIN]

GEORGIE

Uh, no, they're, they're not –

We didn't rescue them.

LAVERNE

No? So where did they come from?

MELANIE

[Pointedly] Great question. John, do you want to field that one?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, right, okay. Well, um… We were… We're from out there. We've been wandering the world. Seeing all its horrors.

LAVERNE

God, that sounds awful.

MARTIN

Er… Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

But we're old friends of your… uh, prophets.

CELIA

[Embarrassed] Oh, um… they don't like it when you call them that.

MELANIE

[Emphatically] We haven't prophesied anything.

ARCHIVIST

Well, that's a fair point. I suppose, technically, 'saviours' would be the correct –

MELANIE

Oh, shut up! John!

GEORGIE

Anyway… they're passing through. They won't be staying with us long.

MARTIN

Oh, er, right. Yes.

LAVERNE

Hang on… Sims…

Melanie, this isn't your old boss?

ARCHIVIST

I – What?

MELANIE

I used to talk about you in therapy.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Oh! Oh, I suppose that makes sense.

GEORGIE

Hmmm.

LAVERNE

Small world… Nice to finally put a face to the name.

ARCHIVIST

Uh, yes.

Yes.

CELIA

[Uncomfortable] Right.

Oh, Georgie, I mean to – Sorry, um, just –

[PAPERS RUSTLE]

Do you know what this is doing here? I haven't seen it before, and you're always saying to tell you anything weird so…

GEORGIE

I see…

Thank you Celia. Could you turn that off, please.

[FOOTSTEPS]

[Brusquely] John, a word?

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

GEORGIE

Yeah, look and I understand that, but you've got to realise this isn't just –

ARCHIVIST

Uh, Georgie?

GEORGIE

Oh, seriously? For fu–

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

GEORGIE

No, they can piss off! No! I refuse.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[REPEATED SOUNDS OF ENTHUSIASTIC TAPE RECORDER SMASHING]

GEORGIE

I can do this all day!

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

GEORGIE

[Breathlessly] For god's sake!

ARCHIVIST

Georgie, it's not going to make a difference.

GEORGIE

I'm not going to let us be spied on, John!

ARCHIVIST

Look, the tunnels offer some protection, but clearly not enough to stop whatever is manifesting these recorders. If you smash this one, they'll just make another one. Trust me on this, you need to let it go.

[DISGRUNTLED SOUND FROM GEORGIE WHILE TAKING MOMENT TO RECOMPOSE]

GEORGIE

There are seven with us now.

[Sigh] It used to be more, a lot more. But… um, we got greedy, pulled too many out. We… attracted attention. And… well, now there are seven.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry. I didn't know.

GEORGIE

Martin said you knew everything now.

ARCHIVIST

Not everything. Between the tunnels, and your and Melanie's… position relative to The Eye… I'm a bit in the dark here.

GEORGIE

No pun intended.

ARCHIVIST

Sure.

GEORGIE

…

So what? You, just, want me to just leave the tapes running and hope?

ARCHIVIST

I want you to accept that trying to stop them listening is only going to frustrate you.

GEORGIE

Just promise me these things aren't going to harm my people.

ARCHIVIST

I promise… I promise that they're not here for you. They're here for me. And maybe a bit for Martin. They seem to like him.

GEORGIE

That'll have to do, I guess.

…

It's good to see you.

ARCHIVIST

You too.

GEORGIE

I, um… I think I owe you an apology.

ARCHIVIST

Oh?

GEORGIE

I didn't realise how bad things were for, well, all of you. I mean, I kind of knew, but seeing all this for myself, I… I cut myself off and… I'm not so sure that was the right thing to do any more.

ARCHIVIST

You had every right to.

GEORGIE

Yeah, but it didn't exactly help, did it?

ARCHIVIST

Georgie, you couldn't have stopped this, believe me.

GEORGIE

…

Melanie reckons you're the reason… all this happened, whole apocalypse thing.

ARCHIVIST

[Sigh] She's… not wrong.

[LONG EXHALATION FROM GEORGIE]

I was the catalyst. I-I didn't – Elias – Jonah Magnus used me.

GEORGIE

Well, obviously. Even Melanie doesn't think you'd have been stupid enough to do this on purpose.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Good.

So… this is it? You and Melanie sneak into nearby fearscapes, rescue someone and hide them here?

GEORGIE

Well, it's a bit more complicated than that, but… yeah, basically.

ARCHIVIST

And then you just… stay down here?

GEORGIE

These days, that's enough. We still need to eat sometimes, and drink. Found some supply caches down here –

ARCHIVIST

Jurgen Leitner.

GEORGIE

Yeah, that's, that's what Melanie said too.

Also, uh, we found a pretty convenient nightmare that's essentially just an endless supermarket. Turns out if you take stuff from it, it stays pretty much fine. Not *nice*, y'know, but, y'know…

ARCHIVIST

I did wonder about the 'Ennui'-brand coke bottles.

GEORGIE

Yeah, it's convenient, not subtle.

ARCHIVIST

…

Georgie… Where's the Admiral?

GEORGIE

[With difficulty] He's, uh… he's fine. I guess. He's enjoying himself,

at least. He wasn't immune, not like me and Melanie. And he's a predator, pampered piece of fluff that he is.

Turns out, there's a place full of cats. And their prey.

ARCHIVIST

Poor thing.

GEORGIE

I go to see him sometimes. I think he's happy, in his way. But, um… It's hard to see him like that. He didn't even know I was there.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry.

GEORGIE

…

John… How do we turn it back?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

MELANIE

Was that the recorder?

MARTIN

Yeah, it just started.

MELANIE

By itself?

MARTIN

I didn't do it, if that's what you're asking!

MELANIE

It wasn't an accusation.

MARTIN

Do you want me to turn it off?

MELANIE

That depends. Will it **stay** off?

MARTIN

Not if it wants to be a part of things, no.

MELANIE

Then let it run. It's just the two of us, and it's not like we can attract

any more attention to ourselves at this point, inviting the snoop-god's favourite kid down for a chat.

MARTIN

Hey, that's not fair.

MELANIE

And? I guess the end of the world must've left me all snappy.

MARTIN

Well… I mean, y–

MELANIE

Don't. Don't say it. I actually did a lot of work on my anger, you know? Tried to put all the supernatural bollocks behind me. And now my therapist thinks I'm 'the chosen one'.

MARTIN

Yeah, the apocalypse does seem to bring out the weird in people.

[SOUND OF ASSENT]

MELANIE

Speaking of… uh, you and John, eh?

MARTIN

Hmm?

MELANIE

Congrats, took you long enough.

MARTIN

Oh god! I totally forgot I haven't even seen you since… well…

MELANIE

Yeah. Not… not since before John woke up.

Before you, uh… cut yourself off.

MARTIN

Yeah, sorry about that.

MELANIE

Look, I, I get it. I was still full of ghost bullet at the time, remember?

MARTIN

Oh yeah. I suppose, when you think about – I mean… Do we actually **know** each other? Really?

MELANIE

Huh.

Uh, Melanie.

MARTIN

Martin.

[HANDSHAKE]

[Playfully] So… what do you do?

MELANIE

[Playing along] Oh, um… *[chuckle]* I'm actually one of the prophets chosen to walk the end times unscathed.

MARTIN

Mmm. Mmm.

MELANIE

Yourself?

MARTIN

Oh, I'm the antichrist's plus one.

[MELANIE CHORTLES]

MELANIE

Oh, that… that sounds like a rough gig.

MARTIN

[Smiling] It has its perks.

Seriously though, how the hell did you and Georgie fall into the 'prophet' thing.

[HEAVY SIGH]

MELANIE

Okay, um… It wasn't exactly a choice. It just turns out that since I… severed my connection with The Eye, y'know, and Georgie has no fear, we're kind of… invisible to all the nonsense out there. We only realised when we finally went out to see what was going on… saw how bad it was…

MARTIN

Yeah. It's the same outside London. Worse, in some places. Though I guess that's down to personal taste these days.

MELANIE

Yeah.

Well, we were, we were out, and we found this Spiral maze, uh, and who did we find inside but Laverne, my therapist. I wasn't exactly going to leave her there, so we grabbed her and legged it. And… that's when we discovered we can keep others hidden as well. Not completely and not for long, but it's enough to get them here to the

tunnels. So once we realised that, we started doing it for more people.

…

Have you had to explain any of this stuff to somebody who just doesn't have the first clue about any of it?

MARTIN

Not often. And it never went great.

MELANIE

Yeah, well, tell you what, you sound like a doomsday-ing tarot reader.

Hours talking about The Eye's 'ascendance', and how it's, y'know, transforming the world into a fearful 'psychoscape' and…

MARTIN

They didn't believe you?

MELANIE

Oh, I wish. No, they believed us, but a few of them took it in a bit more of a… religious direction. And here we are.

MARTIN

Mmmm. Okay but I still don't get the whole 'prophet' business. What exactly are you meant to have predicted?

[ANOTHER HEAVY SIGH]

MELANIE

Okay, um…I… *[sigh]* I said I'd had a vision that it would end.

MARTIN

Oh. Right. And er… *have* you had a vision or…

…

Right.

MELANIE

Look, I know, alright. *[sigh]* It was a shitty thing to do, but… if you had heard how, how hopeless they all were, like, when we told them all this. That everyone is trapped in, like, never-ending torment, forever… I had to tell them something.

MARTIN

I guess.

MELANIE

I hate it. They just keep trying to *interpret* everything I do. And they keep calling me "The Blind Prophet", which is a whole other thing!

MARTIN

Er, yikes.

MELANIE

Yeah, uh-huh!

It's why we head out so much. Sometimes we actually are scouting or gathering, but half the time… I just need to get away. If I didn't have Georgie, I think I might just snap and beat them all to death.

MARTIN

Sounds like they'd probably thank you for your wisdom, if you did that.

MELANIE

[chuckle] Stop! We shouldn't talk about them like this. They, they are good people.

MARTIN

Sure.

MELANIE

It's just… hard not to look down on people when they put you up on a pedestal like that.

MARTIN

So how **are** you and Georgie doing?

MELANIE

Honestly? Er, well, these were not the early relationship hurdles I expected.

MARTIN

God, tell me about it.

MELANIE

But don't get me wrong… Georgie's incredible. Um, and she's, and she's far, far too good for me. And I, I only hope she doesn't realise that while there's an apocalypse on.

[HEAVY SIGH]

Yeah.

And what about John?

MARTIN

Oh, you know John. He's a complete mess. But, so am I and… I think we're making it work. Communication can be… difficult when you're on an unholy pilgrimage.

MELANIE

Modern dating, eh?

MARTIN

Nightmare.

[MELANIE CHUCKLES, THEN EXHALES LOUDLY]

MELANIE

Um… Did you meet anyone else out there?

MARTIN

Yeah, loads actually. In fact we… we saw Basira and Daisy.

MELANIE

Are – Are they alright?

MARTIN

No. Not really.

MELANIE

Oh.

MARTIN

Daisy had kind of gone full monster.

MELANIE

Ah.

MARTIN

And Basira kind of… had to kill her.

MELANIE

Oh. Oh… Oh that's…

MARTIN

Yeah. So, now Basira's on her way, but she's taking her own route. I think she needed some time to process.

MELANIE

Well, that, that makes sense. Although I'm not sure how much 'processing' she'll manage out there surrounded by – Oh! Oh, I nearly forgot! Careful of Helen, if you see her. She turned up a while back and tried to eat Celia.

MARTIN

She was **here**?

MELANIE

Yes… a few times. Looking back, I was so stupid!

MARTIN

Because you kind of liked her?

MELANIE

Yes. Yes… Honestly I had started to think she was on our side.

MARTIN

Yeah.

[MELANIE SIGHS]

John killed her.

MELANIE

Uh, sorry, what?!

MARTIN

Yeah, she tried to – I wasn't there, but they got into a standoff and he… he destroyed her.

MELANIE

He can do that?

[SOUND OF MARTIN'S ASSENT]

Well. I mean that's… that's interesting to know. Ah –

MARTIN

Oh yeah, it's a who–

[WOODEN KNOCKING]

MELANIE

Oh, oh god, I forgot. I-I promised I'd listen to some of Arun's latest stuff.

MARTIN

No worries, do you want some company?

MELANIE

I wouldn't put you through that.

[MARTIN SNORTS]

[Quietly] I swear, if it's another hymn I am going to break something!

[FOOTSTEPS AS MELANIE LEAVES]

[MARTIN PAUSES, SIGHS AND THEN MAKES HIMSELF COMFORTABLE]

MARTIN

Oooooh. Mmm, that's nice.

[FOOTSTEPS, AND WOODEN CREAK]

LAVERNE

Careful, she's very possessive of that chair.

MARTIN

Oh sorry! Didn't mean to sit on the prophet's throne.

[LAVERNE CHUCKLES]

LAVERNE

I just wanted to check if you were joining us for dinner?

MARTIN

Oh, food! What's on the menu?

LAVERNE

Cold baked beans.

MARTIN

Maybe later.

LAVERNE

It's there if you want it.

MARTIN

Do you actually believe all that stuff?

LAVERNE

About them being chosen?

MARTIN

Yeah, the whole ‘prophet’ thing.

LAVERNE

Are you asking me personally, or do you want me to speak for the group?

MARTIN

Either. Both.

LAVERNE

Hmm. Personally, I don’t know what I believe. I saw Melanie every week for months, and if you’d asked if I thought she was a ‘holy person’, I’d have laughed. She always behaved understandably, even if her problems were sometimes… odd.

MARTIN

But…?

LAVERNE

But. The world is… well, I mean, it’s hell, isn’t it? Whether it’s a capital-H hell or not, I don’t know, but that’s where we are. And Melanie and Georgie, they can walk through it completely untouched. They can… rescue people, even if they can’t always protect them. I’ve listened to their own explanation of it, and I’ve listened to Danielle call them “prophets” or “angels” or “the

chosen". Neither of them really makes any sense. But… you've got to have hope in something, otherwise there's no point to anything. So, I choose to have hope in them.

MARTIN

I guess that makes sense.

LAVERNE

It doesn't *need* to. Times like these, it just helps to believe. I'm not sure it really matters what.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARUN

[Earnest] So what do you think?

GEORGIE

[Awkward] Um…

MELANIE

[Awkward] Oh, okay, um… Right, so… Arun, I just think that the…

GEORGIE

I don't think either of us is particularly comfortable with your use of the word "redeemers".

MELANIE

Right.

ARCHIVIST

I thought it was quite a good rhyme.

MELANIE

[aside] Shut up, John!

ARUN

I-I, I realise that you dislike that k-kind of thing, your humility is… humbling.

[THE FRAGILE LINE OF MELANIE'S IRRITATION IS AUDIBLE]

But… I've been considering your words last week, when you talked about how the world we're in… feeds on fear, how –

GEORGIE

Mmhmm…

ARUN

– how it's powered and shaped and moulded by it.

GEORGIE

Right…

ARUN

And, well, maybe your powers feed on hope? On trust and faith and… and hope. I want to inspire that. So, I'm sorry if maybe it's a little… florid, but I think it's right.

MELANIE

That's… that's not how it works. Is it? John?

ARCHIVIST

Oh? No. That's not how it works.

ARUN

[Sharply] And what would you know about poetry?

[GEORGIE GIGGLES]

ARCHIVIST

Oh, well, uh… I, um…

ARUN

Who even is this? Are you a new follower? I thought you said it was dangerous for the flock to get any bigger?

GEORGIE

Ah, no. He's… like us. Able to travel through the world.

ARUN

Another nightmare strider?

ARCHIVIST

I do not want a poem.

[MORE SOFT GIGGLES]

ARUN

But… Are, are, are you sure, Prophet?

MELANIE

Uh… yes. Yes he is.

ARUN

He doesn't *seem* holy…

ARCHIVIST

[Archly] And what would you know?

GEORGIE

John.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry.

ARUN

I – Apologies, I meant, I meant no offence. Oh, I – Please forgive me!

[FOOTSTEPS AS ARUN LEAVES]

GEORGIE

You didn't need to scare him like that.

ARCHIVIST

I didn't mean to.

MELANIE

Hmm.

GEORGIE

Look, we're all tired, and you still seem a little disoriented by the tunnels. Let's get some rest. We can talk about next moves tomorrow.

ARCHIVIST

And how do you know when tomorrow is?

GEORGIE

We generally err on the side of caution and sleep in.

ARCHIVIST

Sounds good.

GEORGIE

Oh, John.

ARCHIVIST

Hmm?

GEORGIE

Your tape’s running again.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, sorry!

[CLICK]

MAG191 - What We Lose

Statement ########-31

[NOTE: ALL VOICES IN THIS EPISODE WHEN IN THE TUNNELS CARRY THE DISTINCTIVE ECHO TO VARYING DEGREES]

[CLICK]

[SOUNDS OF LIGHT BREATHING IN SLEEP]

[SOME AGITATION MOVEMENTS, AND MARTIN AWAKES WITH A START]

MARTIN

John?

[TURNS OVER TO CHECK]

[Surprised] Ah! Argh! Stop it! John!

[THE ARCHIVIST WAKES UP]

ARCHIVIST

[Muzzily] Mm, what? What? What is it? What…?

MARTIN

Sorry. Sorry, I – It's fine. I was… I was just startled. We've not been many places you can sleep, so I –

ARCHIVIST

So, what?

MARTIN

You were sleeping with your eyes open again.

ARCHIVIST

Ah. Right.

MARTIN

J-just took me by surprise.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry. Not something I can help, I'm afraid.

MARTIN

No, I, I know. I know. I'm sorry. It's okay.

[MARTIN SIGHS]

[FABRIC RUSTLES]

ARCHIVIST

Bad dream?

MARTIN

Is there any other kind?

ARCHIVIST

Fair.

MARTIN

Speaking of, how are your dreams? I know they used to be… y'know, *complicated*.

ARCHIVIST

I don't know. I don't really remember them anymore. Honestly, it's not really even *sleep* these days. I can only do it when I'm disconnected from… well everything, and it's more like… You know that feeling when you're right on the edge of falling asleep? Not quite dreaming, but not aware of stuff either?

MARTIN

Huh. So, like, standby mode then?

ARCHIVIST

[Soft laugh] I suppose.

What was I like at Salesa's?

MARTIN

Oh, you'd just completely conk out. Eyes open, obviously, cos god forbid the creepy ever stops entirely, heh, but –

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

MARTIN

– you'd just be dead to the world. I actually got a bit worried, once or twice, but you always woke up fine. You said you didn't dream. Sounded pretty happy about it too.

ARCHIVIST

I imagine I was.

MARTIN

…

Hey, I meant to ask. Do you recognise that woman, Celia?

ARCHIVIST

Um… no, I, I don't think so. Why?

MARTIN

I'd swear she gave a statement once.

ARCHIVIST

What statement? I don't… remember anything. Wh– Not down here at least.

MARTIN

It was… *[mumbles something softly]*

I thought she was making stuff up! Heh. I gave her some money.

ARCHIVIST

Why?

MARTIN

Sh-she asked.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Do you think she remembers?

MARTIN

I mean, she doesn't seem to remember her own name, so I'm guessing… No?

ARCHIVIST

You could ask?

MARTIN

Well, no, that'd just be weird. I mean –

[SOFT WOODEN KNOCKING]

Hello?

[DOOR OPENS]

UNNAMED

Sorry. Didn't wake you, did I? They asked me to check in on you.

ARCHIVIST

No, it's fine, we were up.

MARTIN

Don't think we've met. I'm Martin, this is John.

[RUSTLING AND SOUNDS OF BAG OPENING AS THEY START MOVING AROUND]

ARCHIVIST

Hello.

UNNAMED

[Suspicious] Right.

MARTIN

And you are…?

UNNAMED

[Firmly] No.

MARTIN

“No”? As in your name’s No?

UNNAMED

No, as in ‘you don’t get to know my name’. I’m not stupid.

ARCHIVIST

Is that so?

UNNAMED

Names are how they see you; they’re how they find you in the files. You can hide all you want, but if they know your name, they can see you. And take you away.

ARCHIVIST

I see.

UNNAMED

I tell people my name, then maybe **they** learn it. Then **they** come for all of us. You shouldn’t have told me yours. I keep telling the

others! Only the prophet names are safe.

ARCHIVIST

That's not how it works!

MARTIN

[warning] John…

ARCHIVIST

What? She's talking complete rubbish!

UNNAMED

Have you been there, then? Have you fled through the endless cabinets, the, the labels that cut you? The things that 'put you in your place'?

ARCHIVIST

No…

UNNAMED

So you don't know!

ARCHIVIST

But I've seen it!

I *know* it.

UNNAMED

Oh, you know it, do you? Did it bleed you?

ARCHIVIST

No, but that's not actually –

UNNAMED

Then you don't know it. And you're not getting my name.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Sorry. I didn't mean to upset you.

…

So… Georgie and Melanie, are they…?

UNNAMED

They're gone.

Out.

They, they often go out. Sometimes they bring people back, but usually they just go, for a while.

MARTIN

O-kay. Do you know when they'll be back?

UNNAMED

No. They walk their own path.

ARCHIVIST

Of course they do.

[PAUSE, THEN UNNAMED SIGHS]

UNNAMED

Would you like some food? We have… tins. And biscuits. Although the biscuits are really old.

MARTIN

What's in the 'tins'?

UNNAMED

Food.

MARTIN

[Irritated] What food?

UNNAMED

Depends. Most of the labels are gone. Yesterday, I got black beans.

MARTIN

Oh right. And that's… good?

UNNAMED

Mmhmm.

[MARTIN EXHALES SLOWLY]

MARTIN

Right. Well, I could probably go for a… tin. John?

ARCHIVIST

Any chance you could bring me something back? I'm feeling a little shaky.

MARTIN

Do you need to make a statement?

ARCHIVIST

Actually no. I haven't since we got down here. I suppose it must be the tunnels. Nice to be a bit more in control, although it does feel… odd.

MARTIN

Well, it's good to hear. I'll see what I can find.

UNNAMED

Are you coming?

MARTIN

Yes, yes. Lead the way… you.

UNNAMED

Of course.

[DOOR RATTLES AS THEY LEAVE]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS]

ARUN

Uh… Martin?

MARTIN

Yeah? Oh, s-sorry, I-I didn't catch you name.

ARUN

Arun.

MARTIN

Hi Arun, what's up?

ARUN

Sorry, ju… um, just, um, did you lose a tape recorder? I found this – Oh… Huh.

MARTIN

Yeah, it wasn't on when you found it, right?

[SLIGHT CHUCKLE]

ARUN

No. Is it yours? I haven't seen it before, I thought it might be.

MARTIN

Kind of, I guess? They follow us around a bit.

ARUN

Really?

MARTIN

Oh, y-you don't need to worry. It's been happening for ages. Before the world changed, even. You can just ignore them.

ARUN

Since before the end?

MARTIN

Yeah, it's… it's kind of a long story. Ask the prophets, if you want, they'll explain.

[TURNS AND STEPS AWAY]

ARUN

You don't believe in them, do you? In their power?

MARTIN

I… knew them in the old days.

ARUN

So did Laverne.

MARTIN

Yeah, I, I realise that. Just –

Look, it's complicated, okay? It's just a big pile of stuff that no-one understands.

ARUN

[Pointedly] I understand they are able to walk through this world without fear or danger. I understand they saved us.

[MARTIN EXHALES HIS IRRITATION]

MARTIN

Cool.

…

Look, you, you should really talk to them about it, okay, I don't want to say the wrong thing.

ARUN

They said… you also walked through the nightmares. That you 'share their power'.

MARTIN

Ooh, I'm not sure…

It's different, alright? W-We're different.

ARUN

Yes. You are.

When I look at them, I see a future. I see *hope*. I don't know what I see when I look at you.

[NOISES OF DISBELIEF FROM MARTIN]

MARTIN

Okay, well… You're rude.

ARUN

I'm a poet. I speak the truth.

MARTIN

Yeah? Well… your truth is rude! You don't know anything about us. Who we are, what we're doing.

ARUN

I know you look at us like we're idiots. *[Martin snorts]* You pity us.

MARTIN

That's not true.

ARUN

Liar!

[Raised voice] Who are you? Just appearing from nowhere with… phantom tape recorders just scuttling in your wake? Why are you here?

MARTIN

[Agitated] We're here to save the world, okay? Right? If you want more than that, go ask your prophets, okay? Now just… Give me that!

[GRABS RECORDER]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[DOOR OPENS ON MARTIN'S RETURN; TINS ARE PLACED DOWN]

ARCHIVIST

Any sign of them?

MARTIN

No, but the others say it's pretty normal for them to be gone this long.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[CUTLERY SOUNDS]

MARTIN

That said, the, uh, 'locals' are getting restless.

ARCHIVIST

Mmm.

MARTIN

I get the impression our welcome isn't exactly unconditional.

How's the, uh, fuzziness?

ARCHIVIST

It's alright. Comes and goes.

MARTIN

Yeah, you don't seem as bad as you were at Salesa's. Hopefully you won't forget everything as soon as you leave the tunnels.

ARCHIVIST

I don't *think* I will. It was worse there, though, obviously…

MARTIN

You don't remember.

ARCHIVIST

I don't remember.

…

So, what do you think? You reckon they're going to help?

MARTIN

I mean, they've got to, right? You-You're basically humanity's only

hope.

ARCHIVIST

Huh, I mean… okay, um… *[nervous chuckle]* I hadn't really –

MARTIN

Oh s-sorry! That's probably a bit too much pressure, yeah?

ARCHIVIST

A-A bit?

MARTIN

I-I just meant that, look, either they help or they just sit down here and hope it all magically works itself out. And they can't **really** think that's an option.

Can they?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know. I know how Georgie gets about people in her care. If she thinks helping us will endanger them…

MARTIN

Yeah. Melanie too.

ARCHIVIST

Mmm.

MARTIN

And you're sure we can't find the way up on our own?

ARCHIVIST

Probably not. I'm cut off down here, and the layout seems… different to before.

MARTIN

The Eye isn't, like, calling you, or something?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, no it is. But I can't get a clear reading on it down here. It's kind of maddening, actually. Like being on a street you almost remember but can't find on a map.

MARTIN

We might have to just try anyway.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, but without a guide we could be wandering a long time. And apparently there are things wandering about there as well that… might put up some resistance.

MARTIN

Yeah, Laverne mentioned. Do you know what they are?

ARCHIVIST

Yep. They're, um… They're Archivists.

MARTIN

Come again?

ARCHIVIST

Did you ever listen to Gertrude's interview with, uh, Sergeant Heller?

MARTIN

Oh… that's a blast from the past. Uhhh, I think so? Uh, World War Two, right? Under Alexandria? Saw some monster with a wei–

ARCHIVIST

Mmhmm.

MARTIN

…eye. Right.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not the first Archivist. Not by a long way. Most of the others died like Gertrude, but some… lingered, and, well, let's just say I'm not the only one that feels the Panopticon calling.

MARTIN

Right.

…

John. If… **When** we defeat The Eye, the fears… What happens to you?

ARCHIVIST

Nothing good.

I think it depends on what actually happens. If we figure out a way to defeat them, banish them somehow, kick them out of our reality, and back to where they came from, I might… survive. I think I'd stay more or less like this. W-Weaker, but fundamentally still an avatar in a world where the fears are once again lurking on the edges.

MARTIN

But I assume that's the best case scenario?

ARCHIVIST

Depends on your point of view, I suppose. In the long term all we'd have done is bought some more time.

If, however, we find a way to somehow destroy or, uh, eliminate the powers… I'm not going to be okay. There's too much of me that's part of The Eye now. I don't… know what would be left of me without it. Maybe I just die. Maybe I survive, but I lose… something. My identity. My mind. My… memories. I don't know.

[FABRIC RUSTLES AS THEY EMBRACE]

Martin, when the time comes, I need you to promise me that you won't try to stop me.

MARTIN

I promise.

I love you, John.

ARCHIVIST

I love you too.

MARTIN

But I'm not going to doom the world over it.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

MARTIN

And you have to promise me you're going to do everything in your power to live. That you're not going to sacrifice yourself at the first opportunity, just because you feel guilty about what happened

ARCHIVIST

…

I promise.

MARTIN

Good.

God, I hate these conversations.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

Heavy stuff.

MARTIN

I miss small talk.

ARCHIVIST

We could talk about the weather for a bit I-if you like?

MARTIN

Bit difficult underground.

ARCHIVIST

True. In that case I might see if I can get a bit more sleep. Rest up a bit before… you know.

MARTIN

Sure.

ARCHIVIST

Wake me if they get back?

MARTIN

Of course.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS AND CANE TAPS AS MELANIE AND GEORGIE ARE ABOVE GROUND; URBAN DRONE SOUNDS ABOUND]

MELANIE

I do wonder how healthy it is, going to see him like that.

GEORGIE

I know. But… it helps me. I think.

MELANIE

It certainly sounded pretty nasty.

GEORGIE

Well, it didn't look too much better.

Uh, there's a bench here, to your left. Do you mind?

MELANIE

Unoccupied?

GEORGIE

For now. Come on.

MELANIE

Sure.

[CANE TAPPING AS MELANIE LOCATES THE BENCH AND THEY SIT]

GEORGIE

It always tickles me. Coming up here for privacy.

MELANIE

I'm sure I don't know what you mean. Personally, I think a city full of snooping cameras and staring eyes really sets the mood.

GEORGIE

Of course you do.

[FABRIC RUSTLES]

MELANIE

Everything's a bit… shit. Isn't it?

GEORGIE

Not everything.

MELANIE

How did he look?

GEORGIE

He's happy, I think. Does that… Does that make him evil?

MELANIE

It makes him a cat.

GEORGIE

And, I mean, sure it's not a great look for Battersea, but watching it… It's just the gorier bits of a nature documentary on repeat.

MELANIE

There's nothing natural about this though.

GEORGIE

No.

MELANIE

…

We could still pull him out, y'know, like, like the others.

GEORGIE

No. No. It… It hurts to see him like that, but he's safer there. If we took him, we'd just be putting him in danger. We might even be putting the others in danger **from** him.

MELANIE

You're not still going on about that dream of the giant, murderous tunnel-cat are you?

[GEORGIE SNORTS]

You know you're not actually a prophet, hon?

GEORGIE

Sure… But by this point, it wouldn't be the most unlikely thing that's happened to us.

And it's not like the tunnels have gotten any safer with **them** hanging around.

MELANIE

It feels crap, you know, just doing nothing.

GEORGIE

We're surviving. And trying to help others do the same. That's not nothing.

MELANIE

True.

Even if it feels like it sometimes.

GEORGIE

…

I still care about him, you know. But getting involved will only make things worse.

MELANIE

We'd better still be talking about the Admiral.

GEORGIE

John's… doing his best.

MELANIE

Yes. Well, his "best" is us hiding from nightmares in a damp tunnel.

GEORGIE

It's not his fault. It's not like he wanted it to happen.

MELANIE

I know that, right! I know. I know. But the truth is, I just don't *like* him. I never have… and I'm sick of people acting like I should feel so super-sympathetic towards him, just because he's had a rough time of it. **I've** had a rough time of it from the second I met him! We all have! And he doesn't –

GEORGIE

Oh, honey. I –

MELANIE

Okay. I can still hate him, even if I don't, y'know, **blame** him but…

[MELANIE EXHALES FRUSTRATEDLY]

GEORGIE

You know, you're actually quite similar.

MELANIE

Well then at least I hate consistently.

GEORGIE

You should really talk to Laverne about that.

MELANIE

Oh trust me, it came up. Day one I think.

[SAD SOUND OF UNDERSTANDING FROM GEORGIE]

But all that said, we should still help them.

GEORGIE

What could we even do for them if John's some kind of… all-knowing demigod?

MELANIE

Not down there. Martin says they can't find a way up into the Institute.

GEORGIE

Too risky. I told you about the things down near the stairs, right?

MELANIE

Oh, ah, yeah.

GEORGIE

We can't afford to attract their attention.

MELANIE

You're doing it again.

GEORGIE

[Frustrated] Argh.

MELANIE

Look, you-you've been doing so much better recently. I, I know it's really hard to judge risk without a, a sense of fear –

GEORGIE

But I'm still overcompensating.

MELANIE

Well, I mean, not, not necessarily. It **is** dangerous. But… I, I don't see another way out of this. An-And I don't intend to spend the rest of eternity sleeping in a tunnel playing 'mystery tin'.

GEORGIE

Not even if it was just the two of us?

MELANIE

Oh, okay. Yes, well… maybe I, I could handle that for a bit. But if there's even a small chance we could put things back…

GEORGIE

You're right. I know you're right. I just hate getting involved.

MELANIE

We've **always** been involved, right?

GEORGIE

Yeah.

MELANIE

A-A-At least now it's on our terms. This way you can get back to podcasting about monsters, rather than hiding from them.

GEORGIE

[Sigh] Urgh, don't. I was just thinking about that yesterday. How much I legitimately **miss** those shitty ad reads. You know, everything *happened* just as I was recording one?

MELANIE

Oh god, yeah! Um, what was it, uh –

GEORGIE

[Podcaster voice] "Slaughterville: The Town of a Thousand Corpses."

MELANIE

[Happily] Yes! *[chuckles]*

GEORGIE

Some god-awful true crime thing based in a Colorado town where there were meant to be, like, three serial killers or something.

MELANIE

Jesus.

GEORGIE

I was so proud of the script I did for it as well. Thought I'd really nailed that schlocky pulp vibe without it being *super* obvious that I was making fun of them.

MELANIE

Maybe you could do a rendition for the others?

GEORGIE

Not sure how well that would sit alongside Arun's latest hymn.

[EXAGGERATED SOUND OF DESPAIR FROM MELANIE]

MELANIE

Come on, we'd better head back. It's probably not a great idea leaving that lot with John and Martin unsupervised.

[SOUNDS OF GETTING UP TO LEAVE]

GEORGIE

Yeah.

MELANIE

So… we help them?

GEORGIE

Well, we're not going up the tower, but… yeah. I want my cat back.

[CANE TAPPING AS THEY WALK OFF]

[CLICK]

MAG192 - An Appointment

Statement ########-32

[NOTE: VOICES IN THIS EPISODE WHEN IN THE TUNNELS CARRY THE DISTINCTIVE ECHO TO VARYING DEGREES]

[CLICK]

MARTIN

So this is it?

Just up those stairs?

GEORGIE

Just? You've seen how tall that tower is, right?

ARCHIVIST

I don't have much of a choice.

MARTIN

Yeah, but still, it's just walking, though, isn't it? And god knows we've had enough practice. How come you haven't had a look yourselves?

GEORGIE

Keep watching.

[MOVEMENT ON GRAVELLY SURFACE]

You see those?

MARTIN

What – Oh. Oh… ah. Are those… corpses?

GEORGIE

I wish. Watch.

[THROWN PEBBLE RATTLES DOWN STONE CORRIDOR, ELICITING NOISES OF A FRANTIC RESPONSE]

[MARTIN REACTS IN ALARM]

GEORGIE

Shh!

[AFTER A FEW MOMENTS THE NOISES SUBSIDE, BUT REMAIN UNCOMFORTABLE BACKGROUND SOUNDS]

MARTIN

Right. So these are the, uh… 'former archivists' you were talking about, John?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

I don't like them.

ARCHIVIST

No.

MARTIN

So what do we do? How do we get past them?

GEORGIE

Dunno. It was never worth risking it.

MARTIN

Wait, seriously? I thought you had this whole 'invisibility cloak' thing going on?

GEORGIE

Sure, but I'm not exactly keen to test it against the eyeball tower guardians. I don't know the limits of our 'invisibility', and it seems pretty dumb to saunter up and hope it works on them.

MARTIN

Right.

GEORGIE

Look. I've taken you this far. Beyond this point you're on your own, alright?

MARTIN

No advice at all?

GEORGIE

I… I dunno. Believe in yourself?

MARTIN

Wow. Thanks.

ARCHIVIST

It's alright, Martin. They'll let us through.

MARTIN

You're sure?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

I thought you weren't so good at *knowing* down here? What if, what if you're wrong and then we're absolu–

ARCHIVIST

I'm not.

Trust me.

Thank you Georgie.

GEORGIE

Sure.

Good luck.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

And tell Melanie… Tell her I'm sorry.

GEORGIE

That's… not what she wants to hear from you.

ARCHIVIST

Well, then… what does she want?

GEORGIE

I don't know. But… it's not going to be *another* apology.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Tell her I –

GEORGIE

[With a touch of humour] Look. Tell her yourself when you get back down, okay? I'm not your bloody P.A. Anything you've got to say to me, that can wait too.

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

Let's go Martin.

MARTIN

Bye Georgie.

GEORGIE

Good luck.

[FOOTSTEPS AS THEY START WALKING]

[STATIC RISES]

ARCHIVIST

Ceaseless Watcher, see your servants approach. Herald their arrival and bid them welcome into your sanctum.

[STATIC FADES AS THE WATCHERS SUBSIDE AND CEASE THEIR NOISES]

MARTIN

Er… yeah… excuse us.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS RING AS THEY CONTINUE CLIMBING THE STAIRS; LABOURED BREATHING FROM MARTIN]

MARTIN

Okay, okay, hold… hold up. H-Hold on. Hold on, hold on.

[THE ARCHIVIST'S QUICK FOOTSTEPS CONTINUE]

Oi, John!

ARCHIVIST

[Softly] Oh, right.

MARTIN

Just wait a sec– Christ, I just need a moment to… catch my breath.

[THE ARCHIVIST RETURNS TO MARTIN]

ARCHIVIST

Of course. Sorry, I uh…

MARTIN

It's fine. Just… this is a lot of steps.

ARCHIVIST

It's a very tall tower.

MARTIN

Is it? Oh, thank god I have you 'All-Seeing One', otherwise I might have completely missed that fact.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, alright.

[MARTIN GATHERS HIS BREATH, AS THE ARCHIVIST SHIFTS AROUND]

MARTIN

Not keeping you am I?

ARCHIVIST

S– No, I – it's just, I, uh…

MARTIN

What, you're not tired?

ARCHIVIST

Oh no, believe me, I am. It's just, uh… It's kind of *difficult* not to keep climbing.

MARTIN

What, like… you're being called?

ARCHIVIST

More like *pulled*. Gently, but very definitely upwards, towards the top.

MARTIN

That could be a bad sign.

ARCHIVIST

Probably. Too late to bail now, though.

MARTIN

True.

You seem less nervous at least?

ARCHIVIST

[Breezily] Oh god, no. I-I'm far more scared than I was down there, but, I-I don't know, I feel… giddy. Powerful. Coming up from the

tunnels into the tower, I-I can See again and… It's just a bit of a rush, you know?

MARTIN

Sure. Just… just try to keep it together, okay? The last thing we need is you… wigging out.

ARCHIVIST

I'll do my best.

You ready?

MARTIN

[Wearily] Ah, sure. Lead on, Macduff.

ARCHIVIST

It's, uh, "Lay on –"

MARTIN

[Frustrated] Sh– I know, I know! I know. Go. Just go.

[THE ARCHIVIST HEADS OFF AT A QUICK PACE; MARTIN FOLLOWS WITH A FRUSTRATED SIGH AT A SLOWER PACE]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[DOOR GENTLY CREAKS, AS FOOTSTEPS RING OUT]

MARTIN

So.

This is it. The big boss. One last set of unnecessarily ominous doors and then –

ROSIE

Good morning! Do you have an appointment?

[STARTLED NOISE FROM MARTIN]

MARTIN

R-Rosie? What, what are you doing here?

ROSIE

[Unrecognising and slightly stilted] Hello, I'm Rosie. Assistant for Mr. Magnus.

Do you have an appointment?

ARCHIVIST

No.

MARTIN (BACKGROUND)

Wh–?

ARCHIVIST

We don't.

ROSIE

Oh, I see. Uh… well I-I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid he's booked up for quite some time.

You may need to try again another day.

MARTIN

Rosie, are you alright? It's, it's us. It's, it's okay, we're here to help.

[ROSIE BACKS AWAY]

ROSIE

Sir, please calm down.

MARTIN (BACKGROUND)

I'm not –

ROSIE

There's no need to get worked up, I'm only doing my job.

MARTIN

Rosie, I'm not *going* to do –

ARCHIVIST

Jonah Magnus **will** see us. Please inform him we're here.

ROSIE

I really don't think that's a –

ARCHIVIST

I insist.

[ROSIE SIGHS]

ROSIE

[Softly] Your funeral…

[INTERCOM BUTTON CLICKS ON, A SORT OF SWIRLING STATIC STARTS]

ROSIE

Excuse me, sir. Two gentlemen here to see you.

ARCHIVIST

The Archivist. And Martin Blackwood.

ROSIE

The Archivist. And, uh… an ‘associate’.

MARTIN

Ouch.

[STRANGE ELECTRONIC SOUNDS COME FROM INTERCOM]

ROSIE

Yes I –

Yes, I-I understand, I jus–

I – Sorry to interrupt.

[INTERCOM CLICKS OFF, SWIRLING STATIC FADES]

[Firm, but with a slight tremor] Like I said, unless you have an appointment there’s nothing I can do.

ARCHIVIST

I understand.

ROSIE

Now, I’m sorry, but if there’s nothing else, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. I’m very busy.

ARCHIVIST

Of course.

[FOOTSTEPS AS THEY WALK AWAY, TO SPEAK ASIDE]

MARTIN

What's she doing here?

ARCHIVIST

She's his assistant. So The Eye put her here.

MARTIN

Did she… choose it?

ARCHIVIST

Did any of us?

MARTIN

So, what? She's just gone? She doesn't remember us at all?

ARCHIVIST

To a degree, but –

[DISCOMFITED NOISE FROM THE ARCHIVIST]

MARTIN

Are you alri– Oh.

ARCHIVIST

I-I'm sorry.

MARTIN

Oh Christ, go on…

[STATIC RISES]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

[PAPER RUSTLES AND A CLOCK TICKS… TOCKS… TICKS…]

"Nosy Rosie", he had said. The words had been soft, hidden behind the CV he was examining, but she heard them clear as day.

"What did you say?" She tried to hide the hurt and disbelief, the sudden impact of a childhood nickname she thought she had long since left behind.

"Sorry?" His voice was light. "I don't think I said anything."

There was a long moment as Rosie stared at her interviewer. His expression was a pure, friendly, confusion, a light sort of innocence that gave nothing away. But she had definitely heard it. Was he just going to pretend it hadn't happened?

Apparently so.

She studied the face of ‘Elias Bouchard’. He seemed far too young for the role he had apparently found himself in, with an old-fashioned haircut that seemed to accentuate the image rather than lessen it. How was he already the head of an academic institution? No doubt mummy and daddy had something to do with it… The thought leapt across Rosie’s mind before she could stop it, and with no small amount of bitterness.

His eyes, though, were different. There was something in them that unsettled her. They didn’t match the rest of his face. They were cold and grey, and somehow so much older.

“So why do you want this job, Ms. Zampano?”

‘Because I need money to live, you pompous ass,’ she didn’t answer. ‘Because I let my imagination and paranoia wreck my marriage, and now I’ve got nothing. And if I don’t get a job, I’m just sitting around an empty flat staring into space.’ Instead she smiled.

“I guess I’m just curious to know what goes on in a place like this.”

[OFFICE SOUNDS CEASE; DOOR CREAKS, FAINT SOUNDS OF SCREAMING IN BACKGROUND]

From up here she can see all of it at such a distance. She can hear the distant screams, spot the occasional gout of blood, smell the burning flesh wafting from far below when the wind is right. Should she be doing something? Her hand hovers over the intercom. Mr. Bouchard isn’t to be disturbed; Rosie is certain of

that, but what else could she do? She chokes down her unease and smiles again, just in case anyone might be watching.

[SCREAMING CEASES; DOOR CREAKS, ADMITTING SOFT FOOTSTEPS]

They weren't actually Cockney, she knew that for certain. They might as well have been asking to take that table up the 'apples and pears'. Some kind of practical joke being played on her? She said nothing, though she glanced around in case anyone was watching from a distance, snickering. The pair of them loomed over her with identical expressions on their identical faces. Expressions of gruff impatience.

Rosie looked over the delivery form.

[PAPER RUSTLES]

'Jonathan Sims', the name read. She knew him. Well, knew *of* him, the things they said about him in the break room, the sort of things that passed across Mr. Bouchard's desk about him. She hadn't been snooping, exactly, but maybe a little bit curious. Rosie had liked Gertrude, Sims' predecessor. The old woman had always talked to her as though she was in on something, even though Rosie had never understood half the things she had told her. Sims was different. He was insecure, aggressive, desperate to be taken seriously. Of course, having seen his file, Rosie kind of understood. Why on earth Mr. Bouchard had given him the job at all was a

mystery to her, but it didn't make it any easier to talk to him.

He *was *in the building, and she really should have called down, gotten him to come up and sign off on the delivery. But if he dragged his feet, that would have left *her* here with these two weird impressionists. And no doubt when he finally did arrive there'd be some drama or other. No, she'd just sign for it, and pass it on to Martin. He'd get it sorted out.

Besides, she was kind of curious to see what was in the package.

[PAPERS MOVE, FOOTSTEPS AND DOOR CREAKS; FAINT SCREAMING RESUMES]

It is him behind it all. She's certain. The words and noises that sometimes leak out of Mr. Bouchard's office are enough to convince her of that. Should she still call him Mr. Bouchard, knowing what she knows now about what it is that lives inside him, through him? She doesn't really need to call him anything, of course. He hasn't spoken to her since she clocked into the building. And there haven't been any visitors. She still smiles, though. Just in case.

[SCREAMING CEASES; DOOR CREAKS, FAINT SOUND OF FIRE ALARM AND AGITATED PEOPLE, KNOCKS ON DOOR]

He didn't even look up from his desk.

"Everyone else is evacuating," she yelled over the din of the fire alarm. Mr. Bouchard just smiled.

“I wouldn’t worry about it, Rosie.” He shuffled his papers. “Just a little incident down in the Archives. It’ll be dealt with soon enough.”

Something was wrong. He hadn’t had any calls. No-one had come by. There was no way for him to know what was going on. But he said it with such confidence. She turned and slowly walked back to her desk.

[FOOTSTEPS AND PAPER RUSTLING]

Something was going on, and Rosie wasn’t going anywhere until she knew what it was.

[RUNNING FOOTSTEPS]

When Sasha James barrelled past her without even glancing in her direction, Rosie knew she’d been right to wait.

[FAINT SOUND OF ELIAS AND SASHA TALKING]

She moved quickly to the door, listening, looking around the edge. What were they talking about? Worms? Like that weird infestation they had down there? How is that an emergency?

Behind his desk, without missing a beat of his conversation, Elias caught her eye, and suddenly she was a child again, creeping towards the rotten board in her parents’ attic, burning to know

what lurked behind it, [FLOORBOARD CREAKS WARNINGLY] unsuspecting of the squirming nest of half-dead insect bodies she was about to reveal.

[INSECTILE AND SQUIRMING NOISES]

Then she was back in the office. Mr. Bouchard was still smiling. And Rosie turned to run.

[RUNNING FOOTSTEPS; DOOR CREAKS AND FAINT SCREAMING RESUMES]

Maybe she *could* help, stuck here at the top of the impossible tower. She could just buzz him, ask him what was going on, tell him to stop.

Her finger hovered over the button. Her hand was shaking. What if he got angry? She couldn't afford to lose this job. She couldn't. Rosie put her hand down and started smiling again. She was getting very good at it by now.

[SCREAMING CEASES; DOOR CREAKS]

She had waited for the gunshot. Her whole body felt like it was made of glass, locked in place but ready to shatter at any moment. Mr. Bouchard had told her explicitly, 'Do not phone the police.' But that woman, she'd been *dressed* as police. And she had a gun. A-and Sims, she'd been practically dragging him. What was Rosie

supposed to do, except wait for a gunshot that never came.

Then the others arrived; Tim and that new girl.

[FOOTSTEPS AS THEY ENTER THE OFFICE; FAINT SOUNDS OF TALKING]

She wanted to warn them, to tell them something was wrong, but… what if it made Mr. Bouchard angry? Why did the thought of that terrify her so? He was just a man, and he'd never been anything but cordial to her. Did she need this job that badly?

At the back of her mind, her curiosity urged her to get closer, to try and hear what was being said. But this time fear locked her into her seat. When the other police *did* come, and Mr. Bouchard's voice came through the intercom, so light, so in control, she sent them away, and watched as the others filed out of his office so slowly, so defeated…

[FAINT VOICES STOP; FOOTSTEPS FILE OUT]

That was when she no longer suspected. She knew. Finally her paranoia had not been for nothing. She **was** working for evil. Not someone misguided, not selfish, but truly evil. And she knew she was going to sit there and ignore that fact. She knew the sort of information he had on everyone, and now she knew what he was capable of, what he might do if he thought Rosie might be a threat. She was just going to sit there, watch, and hope to go unnoticed.

And a small part of her, almost wanted to see what was going to happen.

[DOOR CREAKS AND FAINT SCREAMING RESUMES]

Why doesn't she do it? She knows he's in there, she can hear him occasionally. And he likes her, Rosie's pretty sure of that. She is perhaps the only person on Earth in a position to help, to at least *ask* what is happening, to ask why. But now all she can do is sit there and smile, waiting for the intercom.

[SCREAMING CEASES; DOOR CREAKS, FAINT BUZZ OF VOICES OVER A POLICE RADIO AND FOOTSTEPS]

There should have been relief, when they led him out in handcuffs. A weight removed, a tightness loosed from her chest. But there wasn't. Mr. Bouchard had smiled at her as the inspector marched him out. He wasn't even surprised. She hadn't smiled back. She hadn't smiled in a long time, except for that painful customer service grin she had forced onto her face when Mr. Bouchard had visitors. Visitors like…

[RISE AND FADE OF LONELY STATIC]

Of course. The floating unease settled into shape as soon as she saw Mr. Lukas. Rosie knew what he was going to say before he even opened his mouth.

“Rosie, right? I’m Peter Lukas. Elias asked me to look after the Institute while he was away. So, I guess that makes you my assistant. Right?”

She knew all about Peter Lukas, of course. Bouchard had always been very careful to leave his files in conspicuous enough locations for her. She knew he’d been preparing her. She didn’t want to let him down. Or did she? Rosie didn’t even know anymore. At the very least, *he’d* never lied to her, never failed to validate her suspicions or indulge her snooping. As afraid as she was, he seemed to understand her. And as much as she disliked this temporary replacement, she knew she was going to stay.

[DOOR CREAKS AND FAINT SCREAMING RESUMES]

People have come to see Elias. No. Not people. Not anymore. They stare through her, and she knows that she was never going to help. She smiles at them, and politely informs them that Mr. Bouchard isn’t seeing anyone without an appointment. Her face aches, and her teeth buzz in her gums.

[SCREAMING CEASES; DOOR CREAKS, FOLLOWED BY FOOTSTEPS]

Where else could she have gone? Mr. Lukas was dead. Mr. Bouchard was missing. So many friends and colleagues dead. The violence, the gunshots. The old man and his… daughter? Their murderous joy. She couldn’t stop thinking about their faces. How they had

looked right past her as they ran through the building.

Over now, of course. Weeks ago. Too early to forget but too late to act. Wasn't that always the way? Her flat was empty and silent. All her friends and family now so distant as to be almost strangers. What else could she have done except come in to work? She didn't know who for or why. She had simply sat at her desk and waited for the phone to ring. She waited and she waited.

[CHAIR CREAKS]

And it got dark. And it got light. Over and over, and still she waited. All she knew was that something still needed to happen. And she couldn't bring herself to leave until she knew what it was.

[BUILDING STARTS TO CREAK, GROWING LOUDER AS IT WARPS]

[SOUNDS OF ALARUM AND BELLS]

Not until the sky began to change, and the screaming began. And Mr. Bouchard returned to his office.

[SOUND OF BUILDINGS CRUMBLING AND FLAMES RISING IN THE DISTANCE]

By then it was too late. In many ways it felt like it had always been too late.

[STATIC RISES]

ARCHIVIST

S-Sorry.

[FOOTSTEPS AS ROSIE APPROACHES]

MARTIN

[Softly] Oh Rosie…

ROSIE

Mr. Sims, was it?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, yes?

ROSIE

I believe you have an appointment. Mr. Magnus is waiting just inside.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Right.

[FOOTSTEPS]

MARTIN

Is there anything we can do to help her?

ARCHIVIST

If there is, it's on the other side of these doors.

ROSIE

Head right on in, he's ready for you.

MARTIN

Okay.

[DOOR OPENS, LETTING A WASH OF STATIC AND DISTORTED SPEECH FLOW OUT]

[NOTE: ELIAS' SPEECH UNDERSCORES THE REST OF THE CONVERSATION, AN UNBREAKING NARRATIVE OF FEAR AS HE FLOATS AND WRITHES IN PERPETUAL PERCEPTION]

JONAH (BACKGROUND)

– he screams his pitch is low and black as night that flows and chokes his withered throat and hacking cough that sounds like death is here for him who always knew and feared that this indecent end would carve its bitter name full deep inside his soul and burn within without a ceasing seeing moment more than screaming ones who howl and hide from fates that crawl towards on nails that scratch and creak like rotten boards might warn you of

your severed pains approach to pull your skin like sodden cloth and drag it tearing from the now that is no longer even close to what the when just might have been if there was time enough to run and hide from rancid deaths –

ARCHIVIST

[Aghast] No…

MARTIN

Can he hear us?

ARCHIVIST

I…

MARTIN

Does he even know we're here?

ARCHIVIST

I don't…

MARTIN

[Calling] Elias!

Jonah, Jonah Magnus!

Oi! Dickhead! Come down here so we can kick your arse!

ARCHIVIST

[Sadly] He can't hear you, Martin.

MARTIN

Yeah I got that. What's wrong with him?

ARCHIVIST

Nothing. Nothing's wrong with him.

He's the pupil of The Eye.

MARTIN

Meaning?

ARCHIVIST

He won.

[CLICK]

MAG193 – A Stern Look

Statement ########-33

JONAH/ELIAS (BACKGROUND)

– that stinks of hate and wafts to him with promise of the fast approaching corpse that bears his face and holds within its chest the promise of his own annihilation carved in gouges deep and ragged cutting clean through bone that cracked to splintered powder cast of empty blackened earth that is his home again but something's wrong with what he see upon the door is written not his name but words that mean no more to him than jumbled symbols twisting in the edges of his sight that tries to focus on the emptiness around him but the mist that curls its bitter weeping ache around his legs that bristle up with shivered gooseflesh stained with red that's not his blood whose blood he bled but this is not from him and yet he knows he loved this blood when once it beat within a heart that joined to his through choice or circumstance but now it stains his weeping edges scarlet gloating now of all the butchered ugly fates that might already have befallen what you still might boast he loves at hands that might be moved by others or that might just now be his what have you done what have you done what have you done what have you done why do you hear upon the gloating wind the screaming of his name as now he begs him please to stop the razor slicing through that flesh but there is nothing he can do from here upon the threshold to a house she almost knows to be a home but

empty hollow and devoid of all the trappings that could once have given comfort to the pale and weeping shadow of her life that has been left devoid and faded at the corners like a photograph whose sepia-tinted warmth has drained to just a crowd of faceless staring strangers among whom once she stood to feel safe as houses no-one dares to enter anymore in case they trip upon the mouldy corpse of memories that once gave hope and now provide her nothing but a smile upon the face of something grinning at her sharply and with teeth like rows of hungry needles desperate still to stick through skin like cloth into a tapestry of suffering that billows in the wind and gusts like sails upon a wide and pitch black sea with no horizon in the distance calling one and all towards it with a pull that makes her stomach drop to know she can't resist the waves that lap and drag her over and across the surface still as cracked obsidian but deeper that the world could ever dream as something wakes and shifts below they grab the wheel and cry in panic at their howling crew to ready for a harrowed doomed escape from what begins to rise below them–

[FOOTSTEPS AS THE ARCHIVIST AND MARTIN PACE AROUND LOOKING UP AT THE FLOATING FEAR CONDUIT THAT IS JONAH MAGNUS, CHANTING AND CHANNELLING IT TO THE UNFATHOMABLE EYE THAT STARES DOWN FROM ABOVE]

MARTIN

What do you mean he's won?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, he's done it. He's… ascended, become a part of The Eye. He's… he's beyond us.

MARTIN

[To Jonah] Just shut up! Christ!

ARCHIVIST

He can't hear you.

MARTIN

So, so what? He's not aware of us? Of, of any of this?

ARCHIVIST

No. Or if he is, it's only as a miniscule speck amongst the flood of knowledge and fear that's passing through him. He is become the conduit between this new world and the thing that watches it. It's all running through him.

MARTIN

Sounds awful.

ARCHIVIST

To someone so close to it, I imagine it would be a state of… agonised bliss.

I can feel it… the… completeness of it all passing out from him. I can see everything from here, and that's still just a hint of what he must be feeling –

MARTIN

[Warning] John…

ARCHIVIST

– as he watches a man run screaming down endless dark alleys that close and crush and press –

[RUMBLING SOUNDS START TO RISE]

MARTIN

[Hard warning] John…

Stay with me.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry. I-It's a, it's a lot.

MARTIN

I, I can see that, but you need to keep it together.

ARCHIVIST

S-Sorry, I think… I can handle it.

MARTIN

Right, so what's the play?

ARCHIVIST

…

I-I'm not sure.

MARTIN

Well… we came here to confront Elias – Jonah – whatever! So, how do we do that?

ARCHIVIST

He's too far gone. He's barely even aware we exist.

MARTIN

And I'm guessing you can't just destroy him like the others?

ARCHIVIST

No. God knows what would happen if I called upon The Eye to try and destroy a vital piece of itself. Best case scenario, nothing happens.

MARTIN

And worst case?

ARCHIVIST

No idea. An enormous explosion that destroys the world? **We** get torn apart, but still suffering or, or cast off to the edges of the fearscape, maybe? I, I don't know.

MARTIN

Okay. So not that then. But… what about something, like, physical?

ARCHIVIST

I – What?

MARTIN

Look, I know it's all about dream logic and metaphor and all that… stuff, but, y'know, what if we just… what if we just grabbed him and, y'know, pulled him down? Or just threw something heavy at him?

ARCHIVIST

Uh… I, I don't…

MARTIN

Or, or, or, what about, um… That's Elias' body, right? I mean, yeah, they're obviously Magnus' eyes, but that's still a Bouchard body up there so… so maybe Magnus' original body is just still lying around here somewhere? That, that was a weakness before the transformation, so… maybe we could still use that?

ARCHIVIST

It's gone. Ashes swept away by the winds of ecstatic terror. What you see up there is all that remains.

MARTIN

Right.

[softly] Right, right, right.

…

Is the original Elias still in there somewhere?

ARCHIVIST

He's, uh –

MARTIN

Maybe we could get through to him somehow?

ARCHIVIST

Ah, no, it isn't that – Ahh…

[CEASELESS CHANTING CEASES]

[BACKGROUND STATIC LIKE RUSTLING PAPER ECHOES THROUGH THE CHAMBER]

[STATEMENT STATIC RISES]

MARTIN

Again? But you just did one for Ro–

[Realisation] Oh no…

[PANOPTICON SOUNDS FADE TO A TICKING CLOCK AND THE OCCASIONAL RUSTLE OF PAPER]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

He recognises those eyes. He's seen them all his life, watching him, judging him, cutting through him so no part of him was secret or safe. They peel away the armour, his carefree smile and practiced shrugs. They are the eyes of his father, and they stare at Elias over an old mahogany desk, sat in the face of a man who said his name was James Wright. His interviewer smiles with his mouth, but the eyes are the same.

[JONAH/ELIAS IS A DARK, STATIC-VOICED ENTITY – EACH LINE A CRACKLING MIX OF DEEP INTONATIONS YET STILL CHARACTERISTICALLY ELIAS]

JONAH/ELIAS

So tell me, Elias. What are you afraid of?

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Elias Bouchard freezes in place. The question catches him

completely off-guard. Why would he ask him something like that? Elias is applying for a research job – what the hell does that matter?

"Why, uh… Why do you ask?" He gets the words out through a throat that doesn't want to speak.

JONAH/ELIAS

In the Institute we are keenly interested in the anatomy of fear. Much that is stored here is disquieting. It is important to know if anything here might… upset you.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

His mind races. He can't tell the truth, obviously. Elias can't look this man in the face, and tell him that **he** is what scares him. That his eyes, the curiosity and judgement that pulses out of them, they terrify him in a way he can't put into words. He feels that prickly panic building in the back of his skull, that worry that spills through: he **knows**. He knows I'm high. The thought leaps to Elias' mind for only a second before he remembers that he's not. He hasn't lit up all day, of course not, he's got an interview. But even so, he can't shake the familiar paranoia. He looks again at his would-be employer, who seems like he's about to repeat the question.

"Spiders," Elias says quickly. "I'm afraid of spiders."

James Wright nods, the smile curling into one of satisfaction, though Elias is sure the man doesn't believe him. Those eyes break

contact for a moment, flicking up to the corner of the office where, at the edge of a bookshelf that sags with age and weight, a small cobweb has started to form.

JONAH/ELIAS

Very wise. A very sensible fear.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

It is. Yeah, it is. But is it true? For a moment, Elias really can't remember. Right here and now, the thought of a spider genuinely repulses him. The image of a scuttling, filthy creature, eight eyes glinting out in the darkness, crawls into his mind, and he shudders, looking away for a second. But the uninvited thought keeps going. He imagines the spider moving up his leg, his body, he imagines feeling its bristling hairs against the skin of his shoulder, his throat, his cheek. It's spindly probing legs finding their way up his face. Elias can't stop himself picturing that spider sat there, venom dripping from fangs that hang, poised over his eye. He can't shut his eye.

A cough from over the desk breaks his train of thought. His interviewer is staring at him, and all at once he's back with himself, burning with embarrassment. Those eyes stare, impassive and stern as ever, but… is that a twinkle of satisfaction? As though he has been given him an answer he likes. The next question comes slowly, and Elias tries to squash down the fear growing in his chest.

JONAH/ELIAS

So tell me. Have you ever had an experience that you would consider supernatural?

[MEMORY BRINGS UP THE BUZZING OF FLIES]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

And immediately Elias is in that room again, fumbling for the light switch, smelling the coppery scent of old blood mixed with the crusty odour of a room that has been hot-boxed a bit too often. The memory is as fresh and vivid as the day it happened. He knows that Allan is dead, but he needs the light to be sure, to see it for himself. He finds it, and the switch feels slippery beneath his fingers.

[SWITCH IS CLICKED, AND THERE IS THE SOUND OF DISGUST AND RETCHING]

When the light comes on. Elias has no idea how much of the crimson that bathes the scene is from the blood on the walls, how much from the blood that tints the lightbulb, and how much is simply the shading of his memory. But he remembers so clearly what he was thinking as he looked at the what was left of Allan Schrieber: where are his eyes? What did they do with his eyes?

“No…,” Elias tries to say, though his mouth is dry and his head is swimming. “No, I don’t, uh, I don’t think…”

James Wright says nothing as another memory bubbles up from inside Elias, like the last scream of a drowning diver.

[SOUND OF PAPER, PAGES TURNING IN A BOOK]

Allan is in the library, irritated at the interruption, but happy to see a friendly face. The whites of his eyes are riddled with the crimson veins of sleeplessness, but his hand trembles with a feverish energy as he tries to explain the significance of the book he's found. Even sober, Elias couldn't have followed what his friend was saying, lost in layers of theological scholarship, but he smiles anyway to see the reserved young Allan so passionate about his subject.

He looks at the book itself. It's old, crumbling, with none of the usual college library markings. He asks Allan where he got it, and his friend doesn't answer, instead glancing around with a sudden self-conscious suspicion. Elias shuffles round to get a closer look at the pages, then stops in confusion, as he realises that they are all blank. Allan only laughs when he says so. Was the laughter really that cruel? Or is it just the warping of memory, the past he tries to forget, mixed with the nightmares that came after, the faces he dreamed of seeing in those pages.

"Well, er…" Elias is shaking all over. "That is to say…"

Another one. Allan is curled up behind the sofa in the living room they share. Elias stares at his weeping friend, bleary-eyed, trying to follow his housemate's strange monologue, half-confession, half-conspiracy theory, half-urban legend. "It saw me," Allan keeps saying, over and over again, "It saw me through the pages. And it's coming." He sees it, he says, in every mirror, every distant doorway, a silhouette on every skyline. Coming closer each and

every time, finding its way towards him, step by step. “It has no eyes,” Allan sobs, “so it has to feel its way towards me. But it knows. It knows!” Elias has no way to comfort him. He can’t even understand what he’s talking about. And so on that, the last night of Allan Schreiber’s life, he just gets him high, and leaves him to sleep it off..

“I… don’t know,” Elias says at last. “You can never really be sure, can you?”

Beyond that stretch of polished mahogany, so well waxed that his pale, sweating face is clearly visible, James Wright’s smile remains unchanged.

JONAH/ELIAS

Who indeed? Now tell me: why do you want this job?

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Elias tries not to visibly sigh with relief. This, at least, is a question to which he has prepared an answer. He clears his throat slightly, shaking off the lingering image of Allan’s body.

‘Well,’ he begins, ‘I’ve always had the greatest respect for the work put out by this institute on mythological traditions, especially some of the recent papers on Indo-European traditions which was very useful for my dissertation on –’

He stops. Those eyes. They know. They can see right through all his bullshit, right to the core of him. They know what he really thinks.

A position in a small, obscure little academic organisation, the first step on a path to the position he actually deserved. This place could be anything, as far as he is concerned. Medical research, a grant foundation… it doesn't really matter. So why choose the Magnus Institute? Barely known outside its own little sphere of influence, hardly respected among the wider academic community.

[PIANO MUSIC PLAYS IN THE BACKGROUND]

His father's words came to him again, as they always had, through childhood, boarding school, university. "You're a smart boy, Elias, but you're lazy. You have every advantage that I and this world could possibly provide, and yet you insist on squandering them. Don't think I don't see you, looking at those other children with envy, as though their meaningless little lives could contain anything of substance, anything for a Bouchard to aspire to. You are better than them, and they know it. And it is your job to prove worthy of that distinction."

Elias' stomach tightened at the memory, the fierce judgement in his father's eyes. Even laid out in a casket, it was as if he had looked at Elias with disdain. What should he say? That he had no idea why he wanted this job? That he was all alone in the world, no friends, no family, nothing but the deep certainty that he deserved better. That he was destined to be important. That it was in his blood.

Where had he heard about this job opening? Had it been in a newspaper? He knew no-one who worked here, but received a letter

anyway inviting him to interview. Now that he thought about it, he hadn't even sent out a CV. Yet somehow he found himself sat across from this man whose smile hadn't moved the whole time, and whose eyes seemed to know why he was here far better than he did.

"I, uh," Elias' voice wavered, paused. "I've always had the greatest respect for the work put out by this institute on mythological traditions, especially some of the recent papers on Indo-European traditions which was very –"

JONAH/ELIAS

Enough. Tell me, why are you here?

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I… I don't know.

JONAH/ELIAS

Were you drawn here?

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Yes. I was.

JONAH/ELIAS

Against your will?

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

No.

JONAH/ELIAS

Then why did you heed the call?

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Because… this is the place I know I should be.

JONAH/ELIAS

Good.

The job is yours.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

[STRANGE STATIC RISES. A FAINT REPEATING RUMBLING SOUND STARTS UP]

Elias has the briefest of flashes, a sudden burst of terror, an image of himself, strapped down, helpless. The vanishing of well-known faces, and the harsh sneers that replace them as they stare at him. He cannot move. He cannot scream. What is happening? What is that he feels deep down his skull? What are they doing to his eyes? The presence, old and rotten, in his mind?

He can do nothing but watch.

[SOUNDS FADE]

The moment passes, and Elias returns to himself. He tries to smile,

and thanks his new employer for the opportunity.

[STATEMENT STATIC RISES, THEN FADES AWAY INTO THE SOUNDS OF THE PANOPTICON]

MARTIN

You alright? That was… intense.

[JONAH/ELIAS' CHANTING NARRATIVE UNCEASES]

JONAH/ELIAS (BACKGROUND)

…as they look down to see the pitch black void of ocean getting darker still as something rises up that dwarfs the sky and yet they know it is the smallest tip of only one appendage reaching up splitting timber splitting steel splitting friends all into shapes and forms and spatters that don't register as human even as the inky frozen sea pulls air out of their lungs because it is so cold it is so cold it is so coldly sneering as sticky strands pull taut against the flailing struggles as they try to pull away from what approaches in the distant edge of this colossal latticework of bone and sickly paste that twists and curls with each vibration of those fools like them now caught and wrapped and flailing in their heaving desperation not to see it looming over them with glassy eyes and fangs that drip with poison and the promise of the slow and steady agony of feeling all that was herself dissolved and broken down into the bitter pleading –

ARCHIVIST

Yeah… uhh… I just… uhh…

MARTIN

Was that… the real Elias? Is he still in there then?

ARCHIVIST

No… No. It was… an echo. The last spasm of a corpse. It-It's far too late for either of them.

MARTIN

Damn.

ARCHIVIST

There was never anything we could have done. But I-I saw…

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

You were right.

MARTIN

About what?

ARCHIVIST

His body **is** vulnerable. At least to me.

MARTIN

…

What's the catch?

ARCHIVIST

I could kill his body, sever the link, break The Eye's power, and Jonah Magnus would die.

MARTIN

Okay, that sounds good but…?

ARCHIVIST

But, that wouldn't actually harm The Eye itself. And with him gone it would… it would choose a suitable replacement.

MARTIN

Oh.

ARCHIVIST

If we kill Jonah Magnus, I take his place.

MARTIN

Oh god.

ARCHIVIST

And I think…

…that's exactly what it wants.

[CLICK]

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[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS DESCENDING THE PANOPTICON STAIRS – THE ARCHIVIST DOING SO MORE RAPIDLY THAN MARTIN]

MARTIN

John, wai– Hey, just wait!

[THE ARCHIVIST'S FOOTSTEPS PAUSE AS MARTIN CATCHES UP, AND THE SHUFFLING NOISES FROM BELOW ARE AUDIBLE]

MARTIN

W-Will you please talk to me?

ARCHIVIST

I just – I need some air.

MARTIN

In the tunnels?

ARCHIVIST

Yes! N-no! I don't know, just somewhere! Anywhere, without that… thing droning horrors, and Rosie staring at us like we're going to bite her. I just – I need to think.

MARTIN

Alright.

Alright, we'll, we'll go back to the tunnels, regroup, figure out what our next move is. See what other options there are.

ARCHIVIST

…

Yeah.

MARTIN

John?

…

[Warning] John?

ARCHIVIST

I just need a moment. To… to properly consider things.

MARTIN

"Consider" what exactly?

[SILENCE SAVE FOR THE TOWER NOISES]

ARCHIVIST

[Quietly] It might be our only option.

MARTIN

[Vehemently] What are you talking about?! H-How is it an “option”? Okay, setting aside the fact that it’s a suicidal idea, it’s just completely stupid! What actual good would it do? Right now, as far as I can see, we’d just be swapping one self-important, floating, hollowed-out terror zombie for another!

ARCHIVIST

It’s not like that.

MARTIN

Really? Then please enlighten me. Go on, I’m all ears!

ARCHIVIST

Right. When I said that I would ‘replace’ Jonah in there, that’s not –

That place, the centre of The Eye, i-it’s… It wasn’t made for him. That’s why he’s like that, it’s too much, it’s overwhelmed him, his whole being, just destroyed.

MARTIN

Oh yeah? But let me guess, it was made for you?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

[Petulantly] Of course it is. Of course it is! Because how could this journey possibly end with anything less than the final, **supreme** destiny of the Archivist, plugged into the great fear machine for all eternity and, and abandoning humanity.

Breaking his promise.

ARCHIVIST

That's not fair!

MARTIN

Isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

Would you just listen? Please?

…

I think… I **think** that I-I could control it, to, to a certain degree. I could… channel the energies, remake things. Like I've been doing on our journey, but, but on a grand scale.

MARTIN

And how's that going to help? You've always said you can't make less fear in the world. You'd, you'd just be moving it around.

ARCHIVIST

But that might still help. I-I could… rebalance things. Destroy the avatars, make it so that the people suffering most were the ones who, who deserved it.

MARTIN

And what? Replace them with new avatars from the people who don't want to?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, that has to be better than those that chose it right? Sure I can't make it "go away", but I could at least make it fairer. The Eye doesn't care, as long as it gets its fear, it's happy either way.

[MARTIN SCOFFS AT THIS JUSTIFICATION]

MARTIN

[Incredulous] Christ, can you hear yourself? "Make it fairer!" It's not enough that you're the 'all-powerful Archivist', you also have to appoint yourself the **literal** judge of everyone as well?

ARCHIVIST

Don't.

MARTIN

I know what it's like to be powerless. A-And I know you do too. And I also know what it's like when you get a taste of– wh-when you're finally able to–

ARCHIVIST

That's not what this is!

MARTIN

I've been out there with you. I saw the kick you got out of making **them** scream for once.

ARCHIVIST

What happened to "Kill Bill"?

MARTIN

You weren't meant to enjoy it this much!

ARCHIVIST

Why won't you believe me when I say that this **isn't** something I **want** to do?

MARTIN

Because I saw your face when we walked into that room!

[Despondent] That wasn't fear, it, it wasn't even anger. It was envy.

And it scared me more than anything else I've seen.

ARCHIVIST

…

Martin…

MARTIN

We're here to stop this. Not, not take it over.

ARCHIVIST

What other choice do we have?

MARTIN

I-I don't know, alright! I do– But there is one.

Because there has to be.

ARCHIVIST

But what if there isn't? How long are we going to wander around hopelessly searching before we end up back here anyway?

MARTIN

You were the one that wanted to take some time to think things over.

ARCHIVIST

We can't just dismiss this. It might be our only option.

MARTIN

…

No.

No. I forbid it.

ARCHIVIST

[Incredulous] You forbid it?

MARTIN

Don't laugh at me.

ARCHIVIST

Why not? You're being ridiculous.

MARTIN

I refuse to accept that this –

ARCHIVIST

Tough! The world **doesn't** care what you accept. It just… is!

It just is.

…

I'm going out. Ou-outside. I-I'll… I'll see you back at the tunnels.

[QUICK FOOTSTEPS AS THE ARCHIVIST SPEEDS OFF DOWN THE STAIRS]

MARTIN

Stupid… Stupid, arrogant…

…

[Calling] John?

J–

…

Shit.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[EXTERIOR FOOTSTEPS AND URBAN DRONE SOUNDS AS CAMERAS FOLLOW]

ARCHIVIST

Get out of here. All of you.

…

[Attempted compulsion] I said leave me alone!

…

Of course.

[SIGH]

What do you want? No, I, I know what you want.

But maybe you're right.

…

No, that's – Martin's right. It's not worth it.

Why am I even talking to you? You don't even have a mind, not really. That's what you want, isn't it? Something to be your focus, your will. Keeping you fed and placated and content!

…

You got something to say?

Then say it.

[FAINT STATIC]

Of course.

[DRONES FADE AS STATEMENT STATIC RISES]

[CLINK OF SPOON WHILE STIRRING, THEN PUT DOWN, FOLLOWED BY DRINKING SOUNDS]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

The old man was dead. The old man was dead, and Malcolm could feel nothing but ice-cold relief washing over him. Every step he took seemed lighter.

[FOOTSTEPS]

Every breath seemed cleaner, as though he were walking through a bracing autumn evening. He knew he should be devastated, should be shattered by the loss of what had been the one constant in his life for as long as he could remember, but when his eyes passed over the stained and sagging armchair where the old man had sat, unmoving, for the last decade, the absence of that angular, judging face brought a smile to his lips. A smile of freedom.

At last he could do what he liked. No prying questions when he walked in the door. No more knowing sneers, demanding to be told where he had been. No more tiptoeing around his home in a desperate, futile attempt to avoid the sight of someone who, despite never seeming to move from that spot, seemed all too aware of Malcolm's every private thought, his every dark impulse.

What was the old man's name again? Malcolm could barely recall.

It didn't matter, though, no more than it mattered whether he had been a father, grandfather, elderly friend, or even some sort of landlord. What mattered was that for as long as he could remember – how long was that? – the old man had sat on his threadbare throne, and held court over Malcolm's life. And now he was dead. The morticians had taken the body away – or at least, someone had – and he had been the only one at the sad, overcast funeral. Now he was free to live his life.

To live his life. What did that even mean anymore? What was there for him that wasn't simply avoiding the cruel barbs and snide judgements of the old man? Perhaps… love? Yes, perhaps now, without the wrinkled threat that chuckled from his armchair at any thought of his happiness, perhaps now he could find someone to spend his life with.

[COMPUTER NOISES]

Malcolm fired up his old computer, which groaned to life with a sputter, the monitor cracked and broken, and the keyboard stiff to the touch. For a terrifying moment it seemed as though it might not work at all, but finally the screen lit up in a dull, sickly green. Malcolm clicked through until he found what he was looking for. A dating site.

The name of the website was distorted beyond recognition, but he seemed to still be logged in from all those years ago, and he began to click through profiles. Mary, she seemed nice, but somehow too

long. Jenny seemed to have a good sense of humour, but… half of her was backwards. Hannah didn't seem to have anything wrong with her at first glance, but her profile smelt of rotten meat. Then he found Antonia, and he gasped. Her smile was so wide and so open that all at once he felt a wave of warm infatuation pass down and over his body, permeating everywhere… Except for his right shoulder, which remained ice cold.

Something was wrong. Malcolm moved his fingers across and over the area, feeling the space between his neck and arm. There was a lump there. Hard and round and smooth to the touch. He pressed it gently, and winced as pain radiated through him. Gingerly, he unbuttoned his shirt, sliding the rough fabric down his torso, and examined the shining protrusion. Some sort of callous? A tumour? Malcolm's mind began running frantically through all the worst-case possibilities. And then…

[FLESHY SOUND OF OPENING]

The iris was dull grey, surrounded by yellowed, bloodshot tissue, and the pupil was dull, almost cloudy, but the eye staring out from his shoulder seemed to focus well enough.

[WATERY SOUNDS OF VITREOUS SANS HUMOUR]

It swivelled wildly, looking all around the room as Malcolm desperately tried to hold back a scream. Then it settled on the dull glow of the computer monitor. On Antonia. And the icy shock of

bitter disapproval shot through his veins like lightning. His hand lunged out almost on reflex, snatching the power cable from the computer and pulling it free. The screen went dark with a small pop, and Malcolm was left sitting there, shaking. The eye turned once towards his pale and terrified face, then closed in satisfaction.

[FOOTSTEPS]

The waiting room was almost empty when he got to Accident & Emergency. The nurse sat at the desk gave him a weird look and told him to take a seat. He tried to settle down on one of the smooth, orange chairs, bolted to a long iron bar to form a crude bench, but he couldn't get comfortable. From underneath his coat, he could hear it; the tiny, whispering mouth that had opened up on the long Tube-ride over.

"They're to laugh at you," it hissed.

"No, they won't."

"They're going to tell you that you're a freak, a deviant. They're going to put you away."

"They're going to cut you out of me."

"So you can kill me again?"

"I didn't kill you."

"You might as well have. With your insolence. With your

disrespect."

"Shut up!"

"I'll tell them. I'll tell all about the horrible thoughts you keep deep inside."

Malcolm's leg wouldn't stop shaking. Somewhere, from deeper within the hospital, a laugh echoed, cold and tinged with a judgemental cruelty that he recognised so keenly. He pulled his coat tighter and got up, stepping out through the automatic doors and into the cold night.

He was going to have to do it himself. That's all there was to it. If a professional, medical option wasn't on the cards then what other choice did he have?

[AUTOMATIC DOORS SLIDE OPEN, FOLLOWED BY SUPERMARKET SOUNDS]

He hurried into the supermarket, the dull throb of his shoulder causing his right arm to hang stiffly by his side. There were no trolleys left, nor any baskets, so he grabbed what he could, and held them to his chest, dreading the possibility they all might fall tumbling to the ground at any moment. Kitchen knife, paper towels, disinfectant, vodka, ibuprofen.

As he walked through the huge aisles, that seemed so much longer than he remembered, he tried to ignore the looks of curiosity and

disgust he saw on the faces of the other shoppers. By now his shoulder was clearly swollen, lumpy and bulging under his coat. One woman simply stood there, and pointed silently as Malcolm felt the tiny, stick-thin arm creep out from under his collar, trying to push the thick coat out of the way.

“Let me see, Malcolm. Let me see!””

[ITEMS TUMBLE, FOOTSTEPS FLEE]

Malcolm ran out of the store, dropping his items as he went. All except the kitchen knife.

[KEYS, FOLLOWED BY DOOR CREAKING OPEN]

The flat was dark and silent when Malcolm flung the door open, and fell inside in a heap. The pain in his shoulder was now unbearable as he clawed his way over the grimy, matted carpet, hands sticky from the decades of unnoticed dirt. The only light in the room spilled out from the static of the old television screen, casting his agonies in a pale and washed out cathode-ray glow.

His coat and the shirt beneath it were rags now, torn by the sharp, flailing fingers that reached out from his shoulder. Malcolm tried to breath, to concentrate or centre himself, to find any way to carve out a moment in the chaos and think. But there was none. He pulled off the remaining slivers of material, exposing the tiny, half-formed face and limbs to the open air. And he raised the knife.

“Do it, you coward!”

[VISCERAL SOUNDS OF BONE AND FLESH CRACKING AND CONTORTING]

As Malcolm plunged the blade into his shoulder, he felt it split. Skin, muscle and bone torn apart, opening up like an earthquake fissure, a red and gore-streaked chasm into himself. The sound he made could technically be called a scream, but the agonies he cried out through a gurgling throatful of blood were beyond any noise he could have conceived himself making.

[WET GURGLING NOISES ARE HEARD AS THE FLESHY NOISES GET WORSE]

From the wound came first a hand, then slowly, inch by inch, the arm followed, wrapping itself around his neck for purchase, and pulling out a shoulder, a neck, a face. A sneering, familiar face.

It took ten minutes for the bloody form to emerge in its entirety, and another twenty for it to writhe and crawl its way over and up onto the old armchair.

[DREADFUL VISCERAL SOUNDS WRITHE AND WHEEZE, LIKE LUNGS PULSING TO DRAW AIR]

Through all this time, Malcolm lay there, quietly bleeding, tears streaming down his cheek, and soaking into the carpet. The pain

was nothing to him, not anymore. What he hated most, what he truly feared, was what stared down at him from that chair, that once again regarded him with sneering, bitter judgement. He could feel the old man's eyes on him, and he knew that he would never be rid of them.

[STATIC RISES AND THEN FADES BACK TO THE EXTERIOR URBAN SOUNDS AND DRONES]

ARCHIVIST

Not exactly subtle. But then you never were, were you? Not really.

If that's the most compelling argument you have…

[Smiles] I'm going to go apologise to my boyfriend.

[FOOTSTEPS]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[DOOR RATTLES AND OPENS]

ARCHIVIST

Martin?

[DOOR SHUTS]

Martin I'm, I'm sorry. You're right, I –

Oh.

[COUGHS NERVOUSLY]

Sorry. Thought you were someone else.

CELIA

It's okay. I-I was actually looking for you.

ARCHIVIST

Why? What's – Sorry, um, do you know where Martin – the, the man I-I was with, do you know where he is?

CELIA

That's what I wanted to check! I saw him a while ago, up near one of the trapdoors. I… I didn't recognise the woman with him, so I wanted to check if you were expecting anyone else before I woke the prophets.

ARCHIVIST

[Suspicious] What, what woman?

CELIA

I don’t know.

ARCHIVIST

What did she look like?

CELIA

Uh… Youngish, Black, dressed… normal, I suppose. She had a thing on her head, like a… I don’t know. Like a, a woolly hat? But… I-I don’t know, it looked a bit weird.

ARCHIVIST

A-Annabelle, oh –

CELIA

I didn’t catch her name –

ARCHIVIST

Shh-shh! I –

Please, I need to concentrate.

[FAINT STATIC AS HE TRIES TO SEE]

ARCHIVIST

[Very quietly] Right, Martin… Don’t try and do this to me. Not now.

Argh! Oh god. Okay, um…

CELIA

Are you alright?

ARCHIVIST

We, uh – I need to talk to the, the, the prophets.

CELIA

What's going on?

ARCHIVIST

[Snarling] Now!

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[DOOR OPENS AND FOOTSTEPS ENTER]

MELANIE

Any luck?

ARCHIVIST

[Frustrated] Nothing. Is, is Georgie back yet?

MELANIE

Not yet. But then she needs to actually go places to look at them. She can't just pop up top and check 'the big picture'.

ARCHIVIST

Melanie, please, not now.

MELANIE

…

Sorry.

…

[SIGH]

So, you, you didn't see them at all with your, y'know…?

ARCHIVIST

Nothing. They're hidden. Annabelle must have taken the camera.

MELANIE

The camera?

ARCHIVIST

From Salesa's.

MELANIE

O-oh. So does that mean he's…?

ARCHIVIST

Dead.

MELANIE

Right.

ARCHIVIST

Yes. I checked. I guess she liked him enough to do that for him before she stole it.

MELANIE

Remind me not to get on her good side.

ARCHIVIST

No, i-it's what he wanted. What he said he wanted. But… it-it-it means there's no way I can find them!

MELANIE

Hey, hey, hey!

ARCHIVIST

And I –

MELANIE

Keep it together. Okay. Georgie might have better luck. She's actually looking in person, and from what you said…

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. No. I, I mean, that could work.

But… But if she finds them alone! I mean, if anything were to happen!

MELANIE

They can handle themselves. Right?

ARCHIVIST

You're right. You're right.

MELANIE

It's, it's fine. I'm worried too.

ARCHIVIST

This is my fault.

MELANIE

What?

ARCHIVIST

We… We had an argument. I said some things I shouldn't have. If, if I hadn't we would have come back here together, and I-I'd have

been there to stop her taking him.

MELANIE

You don't know that's what happened.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, he wouldn't have gone willingly!

Would he?

MELANIE

You tell me. You said there was no sign of a struggle.

ARCHIVIST

But if it happened in the tunnel, I can't 'know' that!

MELANIE

But we'd have heard. Stuff echoes down here.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose.

What? So you think he chose to leave with her?

MELANIE

Does it matter right now?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, if they left together willingly, they could already be miles away.

MELANIE

[Heavy sigh] Yeah. And you can't – I, I don't know, see where your blind spot is? I-If you know what I mean.

ARCHIVIST

Not unless I'm right next to it.

MELANIE

Right. Fine. So… we do this the old fashioned way.

Why would she take him? Uh, do they have any history?

ARCHIVIST

Not really.

MELANIE

So what other reason might she want him?

ARCHIVIST

To get to me? To turn him against us, or,or make him an offer or… I don't know, she serves The Web, so it's probably some bullshit domino cause-and-effect **thing** we can't even begin to guess.

MELANIE

Okay. Probably, okay, but it doesn't do us much good to worry about that now.

…

Uh, okay. Let's say, she wanted to use him as bait, to lure you somewhere.

ARCHIVIST

Then why would she hide?

MELANIE

To get a headstart, maybe? So she can set up a trap. Either way, where would she go?

ARCHIVIST

[Exasperated] How am I supposed to know? I-I can't see anything down here!

MELANIE

For god's sake! Pull your head out of your arse, stop trying to use it as a bloody antenna, and actually try thinking!

ARCHIVIST

Just listen, Melanie. I – argh!

[THE ARCHIVIST IS STRUCK, NOT WITH A REVELATION BUT

MELANIE'S CANE]

MELANIE

Think!

ARCHIVIST

Ow… I don't know! Somewhere she'd be strong! A, a place of power, a, a Web domain…

MELANIE

Yeah… I, I don't think there's anywhere like that in London

ARCHIVIST

No, i-it's all Eye, one way or another.

MELANIE

So, what about nearby?

Hmm?

John?

ARCHIVIST

[Realising] Oh god…

MELANIE

What?

ARCHIVIST

They’re going to Hill Top Road.

[CLICK]

MAG195 – Adrift

Statement ########-35

[CLICK]

[STILL WATER PARTS UNDER OARBLADES OF A ROWING BOAT AND THE ARCHIVIST'S EXERTION IS CLEARLY AUDIBLE]

ARCHIVIST

[Weary] Come on. How much further can it be?

[EXTENDED SOUNDS OF TIRED ROWING]

The one time I'm on my own, and it's a domain where –

Really? *[chuckles]* Now?

Fine.

[OARS ARE RETRACTED AS THE STATEMENT STATIC RISES]

[SOUNDS CHANGE AS IF NOW DEEP UNDERWATER, BUBBLING AND DARK, WITH THE SUGGESTION OF A BODY SWIMMING]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Down in the depths, there is a cold beyond cold. An icy, liquid chill that surrounds you, embraces you, pierces every inch of your naked gooseflesh skin with its needling touch, and gets inside your bones, the marrow frozen into nothing but agony. The shivers that wrack your body are so intense that when you stretch your arms or kick your legs to swim, their movements are wild, uncontrolled, pushing you through the water in shuddering bursts.

Water? Yes, you remember. The darkness around you, the forever of it all. Sometimes you forget just what it is that keeps you gripped so tight, suspended in place above nothing. But the thought comes to you quick enough when your lungs begin to burn. When did you last breathe? How much longer can you hold out? You consider for a moment opening yourself, simply letting it in, drowning. What are you so afraid of? But you know there is no release in it. You have been drowning as long as you can remember, and to invite the impossible cold into yourself, through your lungs and into your core, will bring no end to it, no relief. So you hold on. You hold out as long as you can, ignoring the agony, straining against the pressing darkness that has consumed you, and that implores you to consume it in return.

There is air above you. You know that. Far, far above is the surface, the inky stillness of that silent barrier between water and sky, motionless as black glass, an obsidian expanse that stretches away. You could break that stillness, shatter its peace as you emerge, clawing, spluttering into the air. But the idea repels you. Your heart seizes at the thought, and your blood shoots through with a cold

that has nothing to do with the water. Why does your mind recoil and beg you to stay down, to hold fast in the darkness, to simply keep drowning?

Just swim, that's the key. Pick a direction, and swim until you find something. Someone. Land perhaps, or just another who is suffering as you are. Were you doing that already? Which way have you been going? The shivers that pass convulsively through your body make it so hard to tell for sure, and no light will condescend to reach down here. But still you press on, try to keep moving through the pain, through the fear that attempts to paralyse you, to lock you in place as surely as the water that presses all around. How long have you been moving now? Seconds? Years? Your lungs still burn and beg you to succumb.

Something moves. Something deep and old, and larger than your frostbitten imagination can conceive. You cannot see it, you cannot hear it, but you feel it. The water shifts and pushes against you, spinning you around, and tearing apart your thin idea of up and down. It is coming closer, its smooth motion relentless as an iron bell tolling in the silence. It is close.

Closer.

It is here.

You can feel its titanic bulk moving past, just below you. Or perhaps above. It almost brushes against you and, despite the pressure of the water all around you, you cannot fight the frantic

instinct to run. Your legs begin to move, flailing, and where your feet press against it you feel its skin, rough and leathery, strangely almost dry despite the ocean through which it moves, and sharp enough that you feel it tear through the soft flesh on the soles of your feet. There is no pain, simply a wave of sickened nausea that passes up through your legs and into your stomach. You keep moving, limbs splaying in that strange pseudo-run, moving along it, and begging for this thing to end. Sometimes your feet do not land upon its skin, but press on something else. Something smooth and hard that feels like bone. Or tooth.

And then it is gone, passed away from you, and out into the expanse of dark and quiet cold. You cannot stay down here. The darkness hides terrible things, and your whole chest screams for air. You take a moment and focus, concentrate on the feeling of the water around you, the gentle pull that promises to be down, and then you begin to swim, a desperate crawl up through the black towards the vague hope of a surface.

You do not know how long you have been swimming, how far you have climbed, but when you thrust your hand forward you feel something change. It is a sudden release, a weightless freedom that seems so alien to you now. A new panic begins to overtake you, but it is too late, as your whole body rips through the unbroken surface of the sea and into open air.

[RIPPLING SOUNDS AS IF A WATERY BARRIER IS BREACHED]

You feel dark water explode from your throat in something that is half-screaming, half-disgorging foul and icy liquid, and you take a breath. The air burns, perhaps a new feeling, or perhaps one long forgotten, and you open your eyes.

[SOUNDS OF COUGHING AND GASPING FOR AIR, ALONG WITH TREADING WATER & SPLASHES]

There is… nothing.

You look around you, neck twisting violently, trying to take it all in, but the ocean that stretches away is smooth against the reddened sky, unchanging. There is nothing else. No boat to save you, no land to make your escape, not even another lost soul who shares your torments. Deep down, in the icy depths, you could imagine… you could hope. The darkness hides terrible things, but it could also hide salvation. You cannot know what is down there, but up here it is laid out in such terrible stark detail that there is nothing. You only know you are crying because the water on your face is warm enough that it feels like fire upon your cheek.

[FAINT SOBBING JOINS THE OTHER WATERY SOUNDS]

And beyond that, up in the sky you feel it. Looking down on you in something approaching delight, drinking in your despair and bitter dread. Enjoying your misery and terror as you cast about for something that might be hope. It disgusts you, the waves of smug satisfaction that pervade your being as it stares at you. You cannot

bear for it to see you like this. It makes you want to scream, but you know your screams are exactly what it wants.

[SPLASH TO DIVE BELOW THE SURFACE]

You choke it down, and slip once again below the surface. Into the concealing darkness of the freezing waters below, and you leave behind the nothing that waits above.

[STATIC RISES AND FADES AS THE ARCHIVIST EXHALES]

[OARS ARE DEPLOYED ONCE AGAIN, AND THE ARCHIVIST RESUMES HIS JOURNEY]

ARCHIVIST

Well, not quite nothing. Not for me.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[ROWING CONTINUES]

ARCHIVIST

[Softly] There you are.

BASIRA

[Faintly] John?

ARCHIVIST

[Calling] Need a ride?

BASIRA

I, uh… Sure.

[THE ARCHIVIST AND BASIRA WENT TO SEA IN A RICKETY WOODEN BOAT… AKA BOAT PULLS UP TO A SHINGLE SHORE, FOOTSTEPS ON GRAVEL, PASSENGER BOARDS AND THEY SHOVE OFF]

BASIRA

How did you find me?

Oh, right. Obviously.

Thanks.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, uh, you're welcome?

BASIRA

What?

ARCHIVIST

No-Nothing. I-I just… I was worried you might be upset if I interrupted your whole ‘solo reflection’ thing.

BASIRA

It’s fine. I mean, I would have at first but… honestly? There are a bunch more hells between me and London than I thought.

[THE ARCHIVIST KINDA CHUCKLES]

I’ve been hoping for a friendly face for a while now.

ARCHIVIST

Glad I could oblige.

[ROWING CONTINUES]

BASIRA

Not that I couldn’t make it on my own.

ARCHIVIST

Of course.

[MORE BOATING]

BASIRA

You're not… You're not here to just give me a lift are you?

ARCHIVIST

I need your help.

BASIRA

You need **my** help? I thought you were basically a god now?

ARCHIVIST

Annabelle Cane has Martin.

BASIRA

Shit.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

BASIRA

When? How?

ARCHIVIST

I think she's taking him to Hill Top Road, and… I don't know, I just – I needed *someone* I could trust, and I couldn't ask Georgie or Melanie to come all this way, so –

BASIRA

They're alive?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, uh, y-yes, I, um…

BASIRA

Oh, it's, it's fine, you can catch me up later. Let's focus on the Martin situation.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

BASIRA

Can you, y'know, 'see' him?

ARCHIVIST

No. A-Annabelle has a – Sh-She can block The Eye. There's a, a camera. It's an artefact that was protecting Salesa's – Right. So, um, shortly after we left you we found –

BASIRA

Magic camera that keeps them hidden. Got it.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

BASIRA

So they're at Hill Top Road?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

And you're sure? Even if you can't see them?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

And you know the way?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

So what are we waiting for? Stop messing around, let's go.

ARCHIVIST

[Irritated] I'm not messing ar– Right. Of course.

[LONG MOMENTS PASS WITH THE ARCHIVIST'S AUDIBLE EXERTIONS]

BASIRA

It's lucky for me you needed help. I just got out of this weird mirror-maze thing, and then I was just… on an island. I was seriously considering swimming.

ARCHIVIST

That would not have been a good idea.

[SUDDENLY THE BOAT IS JOSTLED FROM BENEATH, RIPPLING WATER AND SPLASHES UNTIL IT SETTLES]

BASIRA

I don't remember there being a huge lake between London and Oxford.

ARCHIVIST

That's because there wasn't one.

BASIRA

Right.

I'm a bit over the whole horror-geography thing at this point.

ARCHIVIST

That makes two of us.

BASIRA

So I'm guessing it represents academic isolation or something? Maybe something to do with 'the dangerous unknown', skimming to the surface, that kind of thing?

ARCHIVIST

[Weary] Maybe it just represents the feeling of sore arms.

BASIRA

Been rowing a while, then?

ARCHIVIST

Hard to say. Certainly feels that way.

BASIRA

Yeah, you look like crap.

ARCHIVIST

Thanks.

BASIRA

You're welcome.

ARCHIVIST

I'm trying to think of it as a metaphor.

BASIRA

And that helps?

ARCHIVIST

Not at all.

I'd be more than happy to let you take over, if you'd like?

BASIRA

No, I wouldn't want to cramp your style.

ARCHIVIST

At this point, that's just about the only part of me that isn't cramping.

BASIRA

Alright, give 'em here.

ARCHIVIST

Here you go.

[OARS ARE TRANSFERRED AND BASIRA BEGINS TO BOAT]

BASIRA

Okay. So… what do we know about Hill Top Road?

ARCHIVIST

Not much.

BASIRA

Another blind spot?

ARCHIVIST

No, it's – I could look at it, but it… it was… it was like a… a hole. You know that feeling you get when you look down from a, a great height, like you're being pulled into the abyss?

BASIRA

Kind of?

ARCHIVIST

[Getting lost in thought] Well it was… was like that. Normally I can see it, see the… webs, and feel the power of The Spider emanating from it, but… as I would look… it's like my mind…. follows the paths of The Web,

[STATIC RISES]

the strands going down and… out… *[Catching self]* It's quite disorientating.

[STATIC FADES]

BASIRA

So what? It's like a… a Web-Vast team-up?

ARCHIVIST

Almost, but… no. It… It's different. Something else. Either way the important thing is that right now, I can't see it at all.

BASIRA

So we know they're there with the magic camera.

ARCHIVIST

Exactly.

BASIRA

[Sighs] And we're charging off into the unknown again? It's just like old times.

ARCHIVIST

Old times wasn't actually all that long ago.

BASIRA

Hmm. True. Feels it, though doesn't it?

ARCHIVIST

Well, hopefully this one will go a bit better.

BASIRA

Would be hard for it to go worse.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[ROW, ROW, ROW THEIR BOAT…]

So… how was the trip down? How are you doing?

BASIRA

Not great. But I think I'm doing better having done it.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah?

BASIRA

I always used to think I was helping people get what they deserved you know?

But then you see people suffering like this, with their deepest fears everywhere, and it's people who I'd say were good people, or bad people or… And there are avatars, jailors and torturers, and some of them seem to hate it as much as the people they're guarding. But they still do it…

I don't know. I guess it's… It's hard to look back on what I did as all

that different.

[Bitter laugh] Bit late for self-discovery though, right? After the world's ended?

ARCHIVIST

We're still here.

BASIRA

True. But I don't really know what I even am anymore? Am I an avatar, or what?

ARCHIVIST

Technically… yes. I think you might have effectively inherited Daisy's role. That's very much The Hunt's thing, isn't it? You kill, and then you become?

BASIRA

[Mournfully] Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry. What I mean is, Daisy moved through the domains, tormenting **you** with the chase, but also spreading fear wherever she went, and watching the results with hungry eyes. I think that's what **you're** doing now: travelling through, seeing places, and feeding The Eye with your observations. And your revulsions.

BASIRA

[Exhales] So I'm what? Just a freelance watcher?

ARCHIVIST

If you like. You'll probably end up with your own domain, eventually.

BASIRA

But if it's The Hunt, what am I supposed to be chasing? All I've been doing is wandering around, hoping I might find something to do, some way to help –

Ah.

Damn it.

ARCHIVIST

And there it is.

[MORE ROWING]

BASIRA

So catch me up. What's been happening? You found Melanie and Georgie?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, they found me.

BASIRA

So I was right, then?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know what you mean.

BASIRA

Yeah, you do. Just after that meat factory, we were talking, and I said maybe you couldn't see them because Georgie couldn't feel fear and Melanie had cut herself off from The Eye. And then you said that –

ARCHIVIST

I said it was plausible.

BASIRA

Yeah, but you did the face when you said it.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. You were right.

BASIRA

So does this mean there are others?

ARCHIVIST

What do you mean?

BASIRA

Like, they can't be the only ones like that, right? Maybe there are other people out there, naturally immune, wandering around or hunkered down?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, maybe. I mean, probably. But, y'know, well, I can't see them, can I?

BASIRA

Ah, yeah. Suppose not.

[MORE ROWING]

ARCHIVIST

I also killed Helen.

BASIRA

Oh.

Right.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[CONSIDERED ROWING]

BASIRA

Didn't expect that.

ARCHIVIST

She was dangerous. And not like the others out there. It was only going to be a matter of time before –

BASIRA

No, no, I get it.

Honestly, it's kind of a relief. How did Melanie take it?

ARCHIVIST

Melanie?

BASIRA

Yeah. She and… She and Helen were pretty tight back when, uh… Oh.

ARCHIVIST

What?

BASIRA

Back when you were in your coma.

ARCHIVIST

I see. Well, I haven't told her yet. So, I suppose I have that to look forward to when we get back.

BASIRA

If we get back.

ARCHIVIST

That's not the part I'm worried about.

BASIRA

He'll be okay.

ARCHIVIST

Hmm.

BASIRA

I know a good way to take your mind off it.

ARCHIVIST

I wouldn't want to cramp your style.

BASIRA

Ha!

ARCHIVIST

Besides… we're almost there.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS ON A DIRT TRACK]

BASIRA

So we're just gonna leave the boat?

ARCHIVIST

Would it make you feel better to know that it's not technically real?

BASIRA

No.

ARCHIVIST

Look, it's fine. We probably won't even be coming back this way.

BASIRA

If you say so.

So anyway, run this by me again, they're like a proper cult, cult?

ARCHIVIST

Ish. They all seemed fairly normal given the circumstances. Bit of a let-down in some ways.

BASIRA

But like, they actually worship Melanie and Georgie?

ARCHIVIST

Worship is maybe a bit strong. They just… revere them.

BASIRA

[Laughs] Melanie must hate that.

ARCHIVIST

And that's the issue. I'd say it's as culty as it can be, when the 'leaders' are actively trying to stop it.

BASIRA

Must have been funny though –

[STATIC CRACKLE AS THEY PASS THROUGH AN UNSEEN DIVIDER]

[FOOTSTEPS ARE NOW ON PAVED GROUND AND BIRDS ARE TWEETING IN OXFORD]

Huh.

Hang on, is that – ? That's the real sun isn't it?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. We've entered the, uh… um…

BASIRA

John?

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, I should have said. The camera, it… it blocks my connection, and I, uh… It's hard.

BASIRA

Are you okay?

ARCHIVIST

It doesn't matter. Martin's here, and we need to find him.

[FAINTLY, A TAPE PLAYS THE STATEMENT FROM MAG081 – A GUEST FOR MR SPIDER]

ARCHIVIST ON TAPE (BACKGROUND)

Behind the door stands a large, burly fly, this one dressed in baggy overalls. Next to it stands a much smaller fly –

BASIRA

Okay, how do we do that?

ARCHIVIST

I, uh… I, I, I don't know. We'll have to –

BASIRA

Shh! Do you hear that?

[THE STATEMENT GETS LOUDER AS THEY APPROACH]

ARCHIVIST ON TAPE (BACKGROUND)

– dressed in what appears to be a child's version of those same overalls. They are both openly weeping. 'IT'S MR. HORSE. AND HE'S BROUGHT YOU HIS SON'. The close-up on that fly's face is an image that still comes to me when I'm having trouble sleeping. Then the text: –

BASIRA

There. In the… the spider web. Great.

ARCHIVIST

It's not exactly breadcrumbs but, uh… but… uh…

BASIRA

You're sure you're okay to do this?

ARCHIVIST

[Resolute] I'll be fine.

BASIRA

[Unconvinced] Hmm.

ARCHIVIST ON TAPE

'MR. SPIDER WANTS MORE.'

[CLICK]

MAG196 – This Old House

Statement ########-36

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS ON PAVEMENT WALK STEADILY, ACCOMPANIED BY BIRDS TWEETING]

ANNABELLE

Are you going to walk this slow the whole way?

MARTIN

Are you going to stay silent the whole way?

ANNABELLE

Perhaps… that's because you didn't seem to like what I had to say.

MARTIN

No, it's because you weren't really *saying* anything, were you? It was all just ominous foreshadowing again.

ANNABELLE

Perhaps I was just trying to make things feel… familiar?

MARTIN

Perhaps the whole ‘answer a question with a question’ thing is wearing a bit thin. Besides which it’s a bit late to play coy. You promised me an actual straight answer.

ANNABELLE

You’d have it a lot more quickly if you didn’t keep stopping.

MARTIN

Hey, this is your magic bubble. You’re the one making it so that we’re, like, actually walking, walking all the way to Oxford. So sorry I’ve got to sit down occasionally, like a human.

ANNABELLE

And the book breaks?

MARTIN

It’s not like you’re entertaining company.

ANNABELLE

And it’s nothing to do with the fact that any lost souls in our area also get a break from their torment? Hmmm?

MARTIN

…

So what if it does? Is that a problem?

ANNABELLE

Actually, I find it very reassuring.

MARTIN

Great, because I'm still going to need to rest. Some of these houses have actual beds, and I haven't slept on a mattress since Sa–

[FOOTSTEPS SLOW, THEN STOP]

Hmm.

ANNABELLE

Problem?

MARTIN

Did he suffer?

ANNABELLE

Did *who* suffer?

MARTIN

Just… answer the question.

ANNABELLE

No.

I did it in his sleep.

He'd always been accommodating, so… I wanted to honour his wishes.

MARTIN

That's a shame.

ANNABELLE

Is it?

MARTIN

I mean… he seemed nice. To us at least.

ANNABELLE

And what of his victims? The people whose lives he destroyed?

MARTIN

…

I can't speak for them. I didn't know them, did I?

ANNABELLE

No. You didn't.

[FOOTSTEPS RESUME]

MARTIN

[Sighs] Is it much further?

ANNABELLE

Less so than last time you asked.

MARTIN

Could you just try answering a question properly? Just once?

ANNABELLE

…

We're close now. Just a few more streets.

MARTIN

Thank you.

…

Oh. Uhh… Huh. Um…

ANNABELLE

Oh come on, Martin. You didn't really expect him to find us before we got here, did you?

MARTIN

[Unconvincing] N… no…

ANNABELLE

We have a sizable lead, and the camera too, don't forget. Besides, even if he did 'ride to your rescue', what then? Would you explain to him that you're here of your own free will?

MARTIN

I mean, that's a pretty generous way to describe being blackmailed.

ANNABELLE

Oh, it's blackmail, is it? Offering you a way out of all this?

MARTIN

You said if I told John or waited then you'd leave, and I'd never know.

ANNABELLE

And you believed me, which was very gracious of you.

MARTIN

[Sputters slightly] I shouldn't have.

ANNABELLE

Why not? I didn't *lie* to you, I do have another option for you. One that means neither of you need to die **or** be consumed by any dark power.

MARTIN

Oh, but you can't just **tell** me **or** John. Oh no, no, that would be far too straightforward.

ANNABELLE

I could.

[MARTIN SIGHS]

But it's much better if you see it for yourselves. And he would not have come willingly. He needs to think he's coming for you.

MARTIN

He can see literally everything. I'm sure he probably knows it already.

ANNABELLE

In a way, perhaps. But I guarantee that being here in person is something very different.

Come on.

MARTIN

Hey, is that – ? You told me not to bring a tape recorder.

ANNABELLE

No. I said we wouldn't *need* one. We have plenty of tapes.

MARTIN

But then –

ANNABELLE

We're here.

[FOOTSTEPS CEASE]

MARTIN

This is it?

ANNABELLE

Ah, I forget. You've never actually been here before, have you?

Well? What do you think?

MARTIN

It's… I-I mean, it's, um…

ANNABELLE

Just a house?

MARTIN

Well… well, yeah.

ANNABELLE

What were you expecting?

MARTIN

I don't know, like… something a bit more dramatic, I guess.

ANNABELLE

We'll see what we can do.

[FOOTSTEPS, THEN CREAKING AS ANNABELLE OPENS THE DOOR]

[Dramatically] Step into my parlour.

MARTIN

Hmmm.

Fine.

[FOOTSTEPS AS MARTIN FOLLOWS, CHANGING FROM PAVEMENT TO WOOD]

[DOOR CLOSES BEHIND HIM]

ANNABELLE

Do take a seat.

[MARTIN PUTS DOWN BAG, TAKES A SEAT]

MARTIN

[Warily] So… What now?

ANNABELLE

I've written you a statement. I would like for you to read it.

[PAPER RUSTLING, THEN FOOTSTEPS]

MARTIN

And if I don't?

ANNABELLE

Then we sit here in silence until the Archivist arrives. But I would suggest you do read it. I believe you'll find it… illuminating.

[A LONG PAUSE BEFORE MARTIN SIGHS HEAVILY]

MARTIN

Screw it. Fine.

Fine.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

[THROUGHOUT THERE IS THE OCCASIONAL RUSTLING OF PAPER AND CREAK OF WOOD]

Once there was a house, a building that, for all it *might* have looked like those around it, was not the same.

Stop, no.

It didn't start with the house. It was here long before any might have thought of it as a home.

Once, there was a patch of land, not quite as firm in this reality as that which surrounded it.

Stop, no.

It's not about the land. Mud and soil has no part in what is there.

Once, there was a point in space that did not *quite* obey all those petty rules that decide what can be allowed to happen in a world.

Stop, no.

It's not a point in space. The Earth spins and hurtles through the darkness, but it still carries it along.

Let us simply say that once there was a place. A place where the universe had… cracked.

None of us remember what had caused the crack, not even those things beyond time who might measure a generation in the echoes of their screams. It has been there as long as they have, if not

longer. It's not a large crack, and to walk by it, even through it, you'd never pause to notice. Perhaps the air around it is slightly thinner, lights slightly dimmer… In the summer there may be the slightest chill. In the winter a warmth that is almost unsettling. The fungus that grows in the damp there is somehow more vibrant in its whiteness, while flowers remain duller than those that neighbour them. But these changes are slight, and none have dwelt on them long enough to call the place cursed. Indeed, few have ever thought much of it at all. Perhaps there are many such places across the Earth. Perhaps it is unique. Certainly, no-one has known either way.

The first to build a home upon that spot was named Eowa. He was a Saxon, and a coward, who had fled the field against the Mercian king, and sought to find his peace there. His squalid little hut was far removed from those of his once-kinsmen. Nonetheless, there he lived and worked, and tried hopelessly to forget the stench of blood and rot, and the feel of a seax knife in the wound he carried to the end of his life. Did his terror call to him with the drumbeat voice of carnage? Did it sing to him with the squirming melody of decay? Could any have told you the difference?

It is strange. That a name, a face, a taste of fear should linger through the centuries, and yet I cannot be sure which of them it was that ate so well. Some fears are eternal, but within them lie a hundred titles, whispered in the secret places of every era of every corner of our world. Who can say if any of them are true?

Whichever it might have been, they knew Eowa's terrors well. Until he was no longer there. Until he awoke in a place that was a place

but… somewhere else. Somewhere the Mercians had pushed further, had taken more. For all his dread of a violent death, his end was quick and clean. And none of his kinsmen ever knew his fate. His hut, left unattended, quickly fell to disrepair, then to collapse. No-one used the wood; the grain was warped.

[BIRDS TWITTER FAINTLY]

Many lived in that spot across the following years. Some in peace, some in misery, a few in strangled fear. But none tied their sorrows to the land or the dwelling they might have erected upon it. The village slowly grew, and became a more populous town though not ever a remarkable one. That said, perhaps, sometimes, in the quiet, those who tried to make it their home might have felt a whisper, an echo of some other place, some place not quite their own. But it never disturbed their sleep.

So what does it mean, for a place to be haunted? A place can be haunted by some**one**, some poor soul whose bones lie restless in the shallow soil. It can be haunted by some**thing**, some crime or atrocity that indelibly marked itself upon the soul of a spot. But can it be haunted by some**where**? An echo of worlds that are not our own, alien pasts that draw to unknown presents, leaking through the smallest, narrowest crack at the very edge of existence?

The closest anyone ever came to knowing was a man named Geoffrey Neckam, a scholar from the University. He bought the house that then sat there from a bow-legged milliner whose name

he never bothered to learn, seeking some peace and removal from his more raucous colleagues. He was a man of God, of course, but also a keen master of natural philosophy, a study he put to use when he first felt the oddities that pervaded his new home – the strange draughts that shifted his candle flame, the gentle murmur that almost sounded like voices. Once he even found a new room, though he very wisely did not enter it.

His investigations were crude, of course, convinced as he was that it was some working of his God; an unseen passage to a heavenly sphere, perhaps, or, as he more often feared, an infernal one. That said, his observations were surprisingly astute, and his rubric of belief closer to the truth than you might imagine. But Geoffrey Neckam had neither the words to talk of dimensions, nor a mind able to meaningfully conceive of worlds beyond the one within which he lived, and its requisite afterlives of course. And so, as a result all his mediations and his intellect ultimately lead him nowhere.

They were not, however, entirely in vain. Because, you see, Geoffrey Neckam lived in fear. There was a reason he chose to live apart from his peers, why he cooked his own paltry meals in privacy, and avoided academic meetings. He was certain that his scholastic rivals were somehow plotting against him, weaving intricate schemes to ruin his reputation and cost him his position, even take his life. It was this obsession that first brought him to the attention of Mother-of-Puppets, the Great Spider, and how we became aware of what this place *was*. What it might mean.

Eventually, the long-awaited knife in the dark did indeed find its way into the belly of Geoffrey Neckam. But by then his only meaningful work was done, and another, altogether grander plan, was now in motion.

It was no easy task, keeping the place close through the ages, working all the while to weaken that crack, luring in the servants of other powers, and so in the resulting clash, pressing ever harder against the edges of our reality.

For a while it belonged to a sculptor of puppets, who made his strings from the tendons of those he felt did not appreciate his art, and he would dance them around in a mocking effigy. He was, in time, slain by a crusading hunter of the Reformation, who would let no heresy go unanswered. He was bisected with his own wood saw.

Once there lived there a writer of anonymous letters, who could not have told you where his secrets came from, only that he knew the darkest desires of many souls, and had the wit to use them to their best effect. He was deemed a civil war traitor and buried alive deep beneath the house in which he had drawn his schemes by a man whose teeth were always stained with mud.

So many schemers and spiders and full-throated monsters. Twisting manipulators and furtive liars. **Each** meeting a violent, grotesque end; **each** widening the crack just a little. Until finally, a man named Raymond Fielding, a smiling pillar of the community who fostered children into food for his grotesque arachnid god, was murdered by flame, immolated by the Chosen of the Ravening Burn.

The house of the time was destroyed along with him, reduced to ashes, and with that the crack finally became… a gap. A hole around which time, dimension and reality began to bend, shudder and leak.

An opening into, we believe, other worlds than this tired old thing.

It was not wide enough to allow true passage, not yet, save for the odd accident. But it was wide enough for what we now intended…

[MARTIN EXHALES]

MARTIN

Okay.

So.

A crack in reality?

ANNABELLE

Oh, it's so much more than a crack now. It's an aching hole, a gaping wound in the very fabric of our world.

MARTIN

And a gateway to other dimensions.

ANNABELLE

Not quite yet.

[MARTIN EXHALES SLOWLY AS HE PROCESSES]

MARTIN

Oooooookay.

ANNABELLE

Dramatic enough for you?

MARTIN

So this is what you wanted me to see?

…

Annabelle?

ANNABELLE

[Wistful] It's a real shame, you know. I was so looking forward to filling you with spiders.

MARTIN

E– Wh– Excuse me?

ANNABELLE

They would have hollowed you out, and worn you like a cheery jumper!

MARTIN

Uh, right. But, since you're *telling* me I can assume you're not going to now, right?

ANNABELLE

That's the thing about webs. People get so caught up on how intricate they are, how perfectly constructed. They never consider how flexible they can be. The sort of storm they need to weather. You can't be precious about a *single* strand.

MARTIN

R-Right, yeah, but a-a-again, because you didn't really answer me, um, filling me with spiders **isn't** a strand of your web now, right? Um. I-I just want us to be, heh, absolutely clear on this.

A-Annabelle?

ANNABELLE

…

No.

[MARTIN IS RELIEVED]

Not anymore.

MARTIN

R-R-Right, thanks. Sorry. S-S-Sorry to interrupt, just, just checking.

ANNABELLE

It's such a shame. There was a time when I was certain you had what it takes to join us.

MARTIN

What? Because I like spiders? Well, used to.

ANNABELLE

Because you always managed to get what you wanted through smiles and shrugs and stammerings that weren't nearly as awkward as they seemed.

[SMALL SOUND OF MARTIN'S CONCESSION TO THE POINT]

MARTIN

Point taken.

ANNABELLE

But I didn't foresee how deep you would fall into The Lonely. Or how far the Archivist would go to get you back. It made things… awkward.

MARTIN

Why are you telling me all this?

ANNABELLE

[Strained] Because… explaining things, giving answers, like this… it's not what I am. It's difficult, against my nature.

And I'm trying to practice.

MARTIN

Why?

ANNABELLE

Why do you think?

[MARTIN GROANS]

Sorry.

MARTIN

Okay, let's try a different question. What **was** your plan?

ANNABELLE

I was going to snatch you away. Lure you both into this web, and then take you. Drive him to despair, so that when you returned to him, bulging, and talking in a thousand tiny voices, it would drive him to a final push.

MARTIN

And now?

ANNABELLE

[Sighs] Your bond is too complicated. I couldn't drive that kind of rift between you now. I've considered every angle, examined every cause and effect, and have finally come to the conclusion that I… *[sighs]* I need to tell you the truth, to explain things.

MARTIN

[Frustrated] Yeah, but **why**?

ANNABELLE

Because if I do… you'll do as I ask.

MARTIN

Oh, will we?

ANNABELLE

Yes.

[ANNABELLE TAKES A DEEP BREATH AND A FEW PACES]

He's nearly here.

MARTIN

John?

ANNABELLE

Let's make the setting a little more… appropriate, shall we?

MARTIN

Hey, just… ah, hah, p-put the camera down, okay?

ANNABELLE

You said you wanted something more "dramatic", right?

MARTIN

Wh-What? No, no, no, wait, wait, wait. Wait… wait –

[ANNABELLE CHUCKLES, THEN HEFTS THE CAMERA INTO THE GROUND]

[GLASS SHATTERS AS HARSH STATIC CRACKLES AND CRACKS AND TWISTS THE SCENE… WIND WHIPS AROUND AS THEY STAND ON AN IMPOSSIBLE WEB STRETCHED ACROSS A GAPING CHASM]

MARTIN

[Distorted] Ooooh shit…

That's a long way down

ANNABELLE

Further than you can possibly imagine.

[MARTIN QUIVERS AUDIBLY]

[STICKY SOUNDS SLAP WETLY AS ANNABELLE SLINGS WEB]

MARTIN

Oi! W-What're you – ? Urgh! Urgh. What i–? What – ? What is this?

ANNABELLE

What do you think? It's for your safety. So you don't do anything… unpredictable. I'd hate for you to fall.

[WIND CONTINUES AS THUNDEROUS RUMBLES AND BUZZING INSECTS INTRUDE AUDITORILY]

MARTIN

When John gets here, he is going to **kill** you.

[MARTIN CONTINUES TO EXPRESS HIS DISGUST AT THE SILKEN RESTRAINTS]

ANNABELLE

As long as he listens to me first, it won't matter.

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST ON TAPE

So just listen –

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

Listen, Martin, you should know –

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

Now, listen to me, Martin, li-listen –

[CLICK]

MARTIN

Wait. Wait…

The tapes…

ANNABELLE

A fine material to spin a web with, don't you think?

MARTIN

What? All this time, through all of this, it, it was just you *spying* on us?

ANNABELLE

Oh Martin. You have no idea who's listening, do you?

[CLICK]

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[CLICK]

[CAREFUL, STICKY, MOVEMENT BY THE ARCHIVIST AND BASIRA AS CHITTERING, BUZZING AND AN ABYSSAL VOID ECHOES AROUND THEM]

ARCHIVIST

Watch your step. Long way down.

BASIRA

[Sighs] It's fine, the stickiness helps.

[ARCHIVIST GRUNTS]

Come on.

ARCHIVIST

Right behind you.

BASIRA

Feeling better now are we? Without those horrible sunny skies and

fresh winds?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, the colossal web stretching down into an endless pit is a significant improvement.

BASIRA

Don't pretend like you're joking.

ARCHIVIST

At least I can think straight now. So we have a chance to – Don't touch that one!

[BASIRA BRUSHES AGAINST A STRAND WHICH THRUMS AND ECHOES WITH HIGH-PITCHED SQUEALS, AND THE CADENCE OF BUZZING SOUNDS CHANGE WITH THE REVERBERATIONS]

BASIRA

Sorry.

ARCHIVIST

…

It's okay. She already knew I was here, I just… I hoped we might be able to sneak you in.

BASIRA

I'm guessing she's waiting at the centre?

[STATIC OF KNOWING RISES FAINTLY]

ARCHIVIST

Naturally. They both are. Martin is… he's okay. He's… scared, but also… frustrated.

BASIRA

You can't see Annabelle's plan?

ARCHIVIST

I know she has something to tell me… and i-it's about the hole below us… her thoughts are all down there… and the threads are so closely woven, I-I follow them out and in and down and through the strands of web and twisting tape and down and down and down into the chasm into the emptiness that stretches out below –

BASIRA

Woah! Woah!

[ARCHIVIST LOSES BALANCE BUT BASIRA STEADIES HIM AS STATIC FADES]

Careful! Careful.

ARCHIVIST

Thanks.

There's a – Sorry, there's a s-sort of pull to it.

[THEY BOTH SIGH IN VARYING MANNERS OF RELIEF]

Every time I get a glimpse of it, it draws me in…

BASIRA

What's down there?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know.

BASIRA

That makes a change.

ARCHIVIST

It's… somewhere else.

That's all I've got.

[THE ARCHIVIST EXHALES HEAVILY THEN STICKY FOOTSTEPS CONTINUE]

BASIRA

So. The tapes. They're from the Web, then?

ARCHIVIST

Looks like it.

BASIRA

Were they always? Right from the start?

ARCHIVIST

As far as I can tell, it's hard to s– If I look too closely at them, my own voice, things get… recursive, hard to follow.

BASIRA

I always assumed they were with The Eye. The whole 'watching, listening, waiting' thing, y'know?

ARCHIVIST

No, they were always using them to spin their own web. Out of my words.

BASIRA

Mine too.

ARCHIVIST

True.

BASIRA

But what for? And why here?

ARCHIVIST

I, uh –

[TRIES TO ‘KNOW’ BUT GOES UNSTEADY AS STATIC BRIEFLY RISES ALONG WITH HIGH-PITCHED SQUEALS]

BASIRA

Forget I asked.

ARCHIVIST

Oh! Ooh. Hmm.

BASIRA

Can’t keep catching you every two minutes.

ARCHIVIST

Heh.

BASIRA

At some point I’ll give in to the temptation.

ARCHIVIST

[Sarcastic] Hah hah.

BASIRA

Different question, then. How do we play this one?

ARCHIVIST

You get Martin to safety, then **I** deal with Annabelle Cane.

BASIRA

Right.

I think we should hear her out first.

ARCHIVIST

Excuse me?

BASIRA

Before you “deal with her”, we should try to get some answers. All of this… taking Martin… she wants to talk.

ARCHIVIST

She’s had plenty of chances. She didn’t need to kidnap him.

BASIRA

Sure, but maybe she –

What? What’s with the look?

ARCHIVIST

How are you feeling, Basira?

BASIRA

[Sharply] Do you want to look inside my head? See if it's full of spiders?

ARCHIVIST

I –

No, I'm sorry. I-I trust you.

BASIRA

How are **you** feeling?

ARCHIVIST

[Sighs] Yes, alright, you don't need to make a point.

BASIRA

Yes I do. You're too close to this, and I need to make sure you aren't going to do anything dumb.

Situation like this, we can't make rash assumptions. Right?

ARCHIVIST

Right.

But if she hurts Martin, all bets are off.

BASIRA

If she hurts Martin, I'll be right there with you.

[HIGH-PITCHED SQUEALS AS THEY BEGIN TO MOVE OFF]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[HIGH-PITCHED SQUEALS RISE BEFORE FADING BACK AT FREQUENT INTERVALS AND THE WIND IS STRONGER HERE, ALONG WITH THE INSECT BUZZING]

[A FEW RECORDERS PLAY OLD STATEMENTS, TOO FAINT TO BE HEARD DISTINCTLY THOUGH VOICES ARE RECOGNISABLY THOSE OF ARCHIVE STAFF]

[MARTIN HAS GIVEN UP STRUGGLING, RESTRAINED IN WEBBING TO THE CHAIR]

ANNABELLE

He's getting close.

MARTIN

[Archly] As if you could hear him over all this racket.

ANNABELLE

[Chuckles] I am sorry you find them irritating.

They're a side effect of the very specific way this web has been spun.

I thought you liked his voice?

MARTIN

I do, when it's *his* voice. I've never liked the statements. It always felt – Yeah.

ANNABELLE

Well, you can trust me when I say you'll be hearing his real voice very soon.

MARTIN

I can't *see* anything. How can you tell?

ANNABELLE

Vibrations.

MARTIN

Urgh, yes, web, vibrations, sure. But that's not actually what's happening here is it? So why don't you just tell me straight? It's not like I'm going to run off. I'd only trip over my own feet and fall in, even if I tried.

ANNABELLE

It's a good way to visualise these things. Symbols and metaphor… they give easy channels for the Great Powers to flow through. Ready forms for their energy to manifest.

MARTIN

Blah, blah, dream logic, blah. I've had this lecture before.

ANNABELLE

You'd prefer we stay silent until he arrives?

MARTIN

I'd hardly call *this* silence.

ANNABELLE

I'd stop them if I could.

MARTIN

Fine.

Let's talk, then.

ANNABELLE

Alright.

[THE PAUSE IS LONG AND AWKWARD]

Is there anything you want to talk *about*?

MARTIN

I don't know! It's kind of hard to think of small talk suspended over an endless void!

ANNABELLE

You're perfectly safe as long as you don't do anything foolish and unstick yourself.

MARTIN

Ah, yeah, yeah. You **say** that, but it seems like you've got this whole **thing** prepared for John, and I don't really know whether I should be trying to derail it, or whether that's just what you *want* me to do, and, and so doing nothing is actually the right thing, y'know? And… you're a hard person to talk to.

ANNABELLE

Why? Because of what I say, or because of the assumptions you make about my motives?

MARTIN

Either. Both.

ANNABELLE

I see.

[ANOTHER FRUSTRATING PAUSE]

We could play a game?

MARTIN

Uhhh…

ANNABELLE

Twenty questions? Animal, vegetable or mineral?

MARTIN

Animal. Does it have eight legs? Yes. Is it a spider? Yes. Oh look, I win.

ANNABELLE

[Smiling] On edge, are we?

MARTIN

Of course I am! You've stuck me in a weird interdimensional web, and threatened to fill me with spiders!

ANNABELLE

No. I said I had "considered" filling you with spiders.

MARTIN

Yeah, whatever. The point is there was a time when it was very much your go-to option! And this **one** time I chose to **almost** trust you, you've immediately turned around and used me as bait!

ANNABELLE

I haven't broken your trust.

MARTIN

Wh-What?

The deal was you'd tell me a way to end this without John trapping himself in that tower. Using me to trap him here instead, in the most hackneyed metaphor imaginable, is not exactly what I had in mind.

ANNABELLE

Perhaps I was wrong about how well suited you are to us. I'm not sure you have the patience for The Web.

MARTIN

Oh, piss off.

ANNABELLE

…

You don't need to worry about John.

MARTIN

You're literally luring him into a trap. This trap. This one right here.

[MARTIN MOTIONS AND TWANGS THE WEB, SETTING OFF

STRONG REVERBERATIONS]

ANNABELLE

Please don't do that.

Technically, yes. This is a trap. But the only one in **actual** danger is going to be me. If he chooses to kill me, I can't stop him. Not even here. And you're not bait, you're just… an invitation.

MARTIN

Oh. Wonderful. I can't wait to attend the Annabelle Cane Show.

ANNABELLE

Huh! You know, I did consider it once.

MARTIN

Excuse me?

ANNABELLE

A TV show. Reaching out into the homes of millions, giving the more vulnerable ones a subtle nudge towards terror. Probably something for children. It never went anywhere, of course. These things rarely do.

MARTIN

I'm, I'm sorry, what are you talking about?

ANNABELLE

You're the one that didn't want to wait in silence.

MARTIN

W– Yeah, well –

[CHITTERING, BUZZING AND HIGH-PITCHED SQUEALS CHANGE CADENCE]

Wait… Wait, hang on, is that him?

ANNABELLE

Yes. I guess you're better with the Web than we thought.

MARTIN

And – Wait, ha– No, uh… is that… Basira? He – He's got Basira with him!

ANNABELLE

Yes.

I did wonder if that would be the case.

Interesting.

And unfortunate for me. That's two heads we'll need to keep cool. My odds aren't looking good.

MARTIN

Odds don't matter if you've stacked the deck.

ANNABELLE

True. Now settle back. Try to look… intentional.

MARTIN

What does that mean?

ANNABELLE

They're going to expect a suitably elaborate scene when they arrive, a monstrous tableau. I'd hate to disappoint them.

MARTIN

Right…

[MARTIN GINGERLY TRIES TO ADJUST HIS POSITION]

So, w-were you thinking something like this, or – ?

[ANNABELLE SIGHS, THEN RELEASES A BURST OF WEBBING, GAGGING HIM, AND STICKING HIM FIRMLY TO THE CHAIR]

[MUFFLED INDIGNANCY]

ANNABELLE

My apologies for the inconvenience, but appearances are everything, Martin. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to change into something more suitable.

[BONE CRACKS AND FLESH TEARS, ACCOMPANIED BY A TWISTED STATIC CRACKLE, AS ANNABELLE REVEALS THIS WASN'T EVEN HER FINAL FORM]

[ANNABELLE'S VOICE IS DEEPER FROM HERE ON OUT AND TAPE RECORDERS CAN NO LONGER BE HEARD]

It is so very important to prime your audience.

[EXTENDED SOUNDS OF VISCERAL ARACHNOID TRANSFORMATION]

ARCHIVIST

Annabelle Cane!

ANNABELLE

Hello, John. Basira.

[MUFFLED AGITATION]

ANNABELLE

Calm down Martin. You wouldn't want to slip off, would you?

BASIRA

Let him go!

ANNABELLE

Not just yet.

[MUFFLED ANXIETY]

ARCHIVIST

Ceaseless Watcher, see this scuttling thing. Take it –

[ANNABELLE HOISTS MARTIN UP]

ANNABELLE

[scolding] Ah. Ah. Ah!

[MUFFLED ANXIETY INCREASES TO MUFFLED TERROR]

You know better than I do if I could actually kill him, but we both know that if I drop Martin from here, he's gone.

So, let's all settle down.

[MUFFLED SADNESS]

BASIRA

What do you want?

ANNABELLE

To give you… all of you, a way out of this.

BASIRA

And you couldn't just, I dunno, tell us?

ANNABELLE

I could, but I needed him to believe me. And for that, I needed him to *feel* this place, this opening beneath us.

ARCHIVIST

Put. Him. Down.

[MUFFLED DEMAND FOR RELEASE]

ANNABELLE

Very well.

[ANNABELLE LOWERS MARTIN GENTLY]

BASIRA

Martin, are you okay?

[MUFFLED MMHMM]

You know, we'd probably be more willing to listen if you hadn't kidnapped our friend.

ANNABELLE

I didn't. He came of his own free will.

[MUFFLED POINT OF CONTENTION]

ARCHIVIST

"Free will," she says, as we stand in the middle of her fucking web!

ANNABELLE

[Laughs] A fair point. But that's a debate for another time.

I simply mean I did not bring him here through force, threat or false pretence. I made an offer, and he agreed.

ARCHIVIST

Martin, is this true?

[MUFFLED ATTEMPTED EXPLANATION, FOLLOWED BY MUFFLED SIGH AND MUFFLED AGREEMENT]

BASIRA

Told you.

ARCHIVIST

We'll talk about it later. Once you're safe.

[MUFFLED DOWNBEAT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT]

ANNABELLE

He's perfectly safe right now. As long as everyone remains civil.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. Speak your piece. Tell us about your "way out".

ANNABELLE

As you wish.

…

The Great Fears, do you believe they think the way we do?

ARCHIVIST

They don't "think" at all. They just are.

ANNABELLE

Almost true. In truth, it depends on the Fear. Some exist in an eternal moment, some make use of memory to reflect and corrupt, but for most, time is simply another thing for them to play with. To consider the future, to plan, is not something they're capable of.

ARCHIVIST

But not The Web?

ANNABELLE

No. Not the Mother-of-Puppets, the Spinner-of-Schemes.

BASIRA

Hang on. What about the rituals? Those were plans.

ARCHIVIST

No. They were… desires, filtered and interpreted by people, and the thinking creatures that they spawned.

ANNABELLE

You **are** well-informed, aren't you? Exactly this. They hungered for the world, to step from the shadows, and gorge themselves on all humanity.

ARCHIVIST

And they have.

ANNABELLE

But only two of them could truly conceive of such. Terminus, The End, knows that in such a world they will ultimately consume themselves. And it desires that finality.

ARCHIVIST

[Realising] And The Web understands it as well. That eventually a successful ritual would doom them all. Leave them trapped and starving in a used up world with no-one to feed on.

BASIRA

Hang on, what? This is news to me.

ARCHIVIST

We passed a death domain, of The End. The victims there **do** actually die, meaning, even though it would take… I don't know how long, eventually The End **will** claim everyone and everything. It's inevitable.

BASIRA

Oh. *[Exhales]* Okay. Right. And what, the powers don't realise?

ARCHIVIST

They don't understand things like we do. But The Web is all about connections, unforeseen consequences. Of course, it realises.

ANNABELLE

Of course. And knowing this, knowing for centuries you would eventually be trapped, doomed to starvation, what would **you** do?

[LONG CONSIDERED PAUSE]

ARCHIVIST

Plan an escape.

ANNABELLE

Just so.

BASIRA

An escape? To where?

ARCHIVIST

Below us, Basira.

ANNABELLE

This is not ‘the’ world, it is ‘a’ world. And though it has taken so very long to prise it open, the gate to a thousand new realities now stands wide. However, despite this effort, the worlds beyond them remain so far unspoiled by the Fears’ touch.

ARCHIVIST

The Powers don’t exist there? They’re, what, *unique* to our… dimension?

ANNABELLE

Unique? Oh, I don’t know about that, but certainly there are many, many worlds without them.

BASIRA

Sorry, we're talking about alternate dimensions now? Seriously?

ARCHIVIST

Really, Basira? Look around us! This is where you get sceptical?

BASIRA

Yeah.

[SUDDEN HIGH-PITCHED SQUEALS]

Okay, cut me some slack. This is a lot of new and weird information.

ARCHIVIST

So The Web, it wants to spread? To escape into new realities?

ANNABELLE

Yes, but not alone. Any attempt to separate the Fears is ultimately doomed, as you well know.

ARCHIVIST

But **how**?

ANNABELLE

We found the one we believed most likely to bring about their manifestation. We marked him young, guided his path as best we

could. And then, we took his voice.

ARCHIVIST

No…

ANNABELLE

His, and those he walked with. We inscribed them on shining strands of word and meaning, and used them to weave a web which cast itself out through the gate and beyond our universe. So that when the Fears heard that voice, and came in their terrible glory, they might then travel out along it.

Or be dragged.

BASIRA

Is she talking about the tapes?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

So how is any of this a solution?

ARCHIVIST

Because for the Fears to spread into these new worlds, they would need to leave ours, wouldn't they?

ANNABELLE

If one should leave this place for… greener pastures, the rest **must** follow.

ARCHIVIST

Leaving us behind in the process, freeing our world at the cost of others.

BASIRA

What are you saying?

ARCHIVIST

We can pass them our apocalypse.

[MUFFLED DISCOMFITED REALISATION]

ANNABELLE

Nothing so extreme. In these new worlds they would exist as they used to in ours, lurking just beyond the threshold.

ARCHIVIST

Until someone is stupid enough to release them there, as well.

ANNABELLE

Perhaps. Even the Mother cannot see the future. Only try to shape

it.

ARCHIVIST

And so they spread through realities like a disease!

ANNABELLE

Perhaps.

ARCHIVIST

…

I won't do it.

ANNABELLE

Possibly. You've seen your other options.

BASIRA

What happens to you if they escape? What happens to us? We've all been touched by them.

ANNABELLE

I would either travel with them, or I would die. I do not know which. My life is only sustained by The Web. Most would simply lose whatever power they have been gifted.

John would lose much of himself, the parts of him that are The Eye. But he would survive. And perhaps more importantly, he would

remain who he believes himself to be. And you would end the suffering of all those others who remain here.

BASIRA

How would we do it?

ARCHIVIST

Basira!

BASIRA

We need to know, John.

ANNABELLE

It's very simple.

Destroy the Archives, and cut out The Eye's pupil.

BASIRA

[Sarcastic] Oh, is that all?

ANNABELLE

Simultaneously.

[MUFFLED DESPONDENCY]

ARCHIVIST

I see. Destroy the Panopticon, and you release its power. Kill Jonah, and you cut the connection between the Fears and the world. Do both at the same time, and… for just a moment, all that power rushes through their only remaining connection with reality: the tapes.

ANNABELLE

And they would be swept along them by it, dragged out of our realities, and into new ones…

BASIRA

And how exactly are we supposed to destroy the Archives?

ANNABELLE

Many years ago a draughtsman made an unfortunate and egregious error on certain city planning documents. As a result, an unusually large and dangerous gas main just happened to be constructed directly below the building you knew as the Magnus Institute, in a place where it would be protected by the tunnels of Robert Smirke, unchanged by the world's reformation. You need only ignite it.

ARCHIVIST

Ignite it?

ANNABELLE

Indeed. And it just so happens that the perfect tool was once delivered to you as a token of appreciation. Though you really do

need to learn to keep better care of it. Somehow it always seems to slip your mind, doesn't it?

ARCHIVIST

What?

BASIRA

John, it's that stupid lighter of yours.

ARCHIVIST

[Indignant] My what?

[THE ARCHIVIST PULLS THE GOLD LIGHTER WITH EMBOSSED SPIDERWEB FROM POCKET AND FLICKS IT OPEN]

Oh?

Oh.

ANNABELLE

A little anchor of our power, so that we, and our tapes, may follow wherever you go.

ARCHIVIST

I see.

So…

[FLICKS LIGHTER SHUT]

…if I were to throw it away –

[ANNABELLE GASPS]

– into your little pit…

[MUFFLED WORRY]

ANNABELLE

[Carefully] I would advise against that.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, would you?

BASIRA

John, she still has Martin.

[MUFFLED REMINDER]

[TENSE STAND-OFF]

ARCHIVIST

Fine!

Fine.

That’s it, then? Everything you wanted to tell us?

ANNABELLE

It is.

ARCHIVIST

Then we’re done here. Give us Martin.

ANNABELLE

As you wish.

[ANNABELLE RIPS MARTIN FREE FROM HIS STICKY RESTRAINTS]

[MARTIN STAGGERS TO HIS FRIENDS, COUGHING AND SPLUTTERING]

MARTIN

John!

ARCHIVIST

Martin!

[FABRIC RUSTLES]

MARTIN

Oh god, I'm sorry, I –

ARCHIVIST

It's fine.

MARTIN

– didn't realise that –

ARCHIVIST

We'll talk later.

BASIRA

What about her?

ARCHIVIST

[Harsh] Good question. As far as I can tell there's now nothing to stop me killing you. And throwing this lighter away forever.

ANNABELLE

Nothing, except your own indecision.

I've played my part to its completion. You get to decide how I exit the stage.

MARTIN

John?

ARCHIVIST

Go!

ANNABELLE

Very well. We shall not see each other again, Archivist. But I eagerly await your decision.

[ANNABELLE WITHDRAWS, SCUTTLING UP AND AWAY ACROSS THE WEBBED CHASM, STATIC AND HIGH-PITCHED SQUEALING IN HER WAKE]

MARTIN

So… what do we do now?

ARCHIVIST

Let's get out of here. After that… we'll see.

[CLICK]

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[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS ON GRAVEL ACCOMPANIED BY SWIRLING WINDS]

MARTIN

So… are we going to talk about it, or…?

ARCHIVIST

When we get back to London. I don't – I think we all need some time to think.

MARTIN

…

Sure.

[FOOTSTEPS CONTINUE FOR A LONG WHILE WITH THE OCCASIONAL SIGH]

I-I mean it's a pretty long walk. We could talk about something else.

BASIRA

Like why you wandered off with Annabelle Cane?

ARCHIVIST

Basira…

BASIRA

It's important.

ARCHIVIST

He can tell us when he's ready.

MARTIN

Uh, it's fine. It's not exactly a big surprise or anything.

Back in London, after we… uh…

ARCHIVIST

Had a blazing row?

MARTIN

I, uh… Yeah, that.

BASIRA

What?

ARCHIVIST

About what we should do with Jonah. With the Panopticon.

BASIRA

How, about whether you should, uh…?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

Well, anyway, after that, I was coming out to look for you. But the tunnels are just all over the place, and you must have used a different way up or something, and well… she was there.

ARCHIVIST

Waiting?

MARTIN

I guess? It was so quiet. And it looked like London did before. So then I figured that she must have had the camera, which meant Salesa was probably dead, and so… well…

BASIRA

So…?

MARTIN

So I figured she had come to kill you, John.

ARCHIVIST

Me?

W-What about you?

MARTIN

What about me? I didn't really think I was important enough to kill.

[SURPRISED EXHALES]

BASIRA

Wow, Martin, that's –

MARTIN

Shocker, I have self-esteem issues, not the point. Anyway, she said she knew what you were planning to do, what would happen to you in there and… and then she said she knew another way, one where you'd be okay, but she couldn't tell me, she had to show me.

BASIRA

And you took her at her word?

MARTIN

Obviously not, but… if she was telling the truth, it seemed worth the gamble.

ARCHIVIST

Why didn't you come get me?

MARTIN

Because she said if I did, she'd leave without me. And then… well… we'd have had to stick with crappy Plan A, and you'd… you'd end up gone.

…

Okay, look, I-I admit it wasn't great judgement, okay? But I didn't see another choice. I figured you were safe enough with the girls, and, well…

ARCHIVIST

You were angry.

MARTIN

Yeah.

BASIRA

Right.

MARTIN

And… if I could give you another way out, it had to be worth the danger.

Even if it was kinda –

BASIRA

Reckless?

MARTIN

– a long shot.

BASIRA

Hmm.

MARTIN

[Nervous chuckles] Plus I knew you'd follow me, and save me if things got bad.

[ARCHIVIST SIGHS]

Look, I'm, I'm sorry I worried you.

ARCHIVIST

It's okay.

MARTIN

But, it does look like I was right.

BASIRA

If she was actually on the level.

MARTIN

Well… yeah.

BASIRA

And if she was, she went about it in a really weird –

ARCHIVIST

Manipulative way.

BASIRA

Yeah. Big surprise. But she did kinda hold up her end.

ARCHIVIST

Huh.

MARTIN

I could've done without all the webbing, though. Still sticky. Urgh.

ARCHIVIST

Well, it's over now. And you're safe, that's all that matters.

MARTIN

Not quite…

BASIRA

Mmhmm. We do have another option to consider.

ARCHIVIST

When we get back. I want to hear what the others have to say about it.

MARTIN

Then we should get going.

…

Er, speaking of? Um… Where, exactly, do we go now?

ARCHIVIST

Forward.

MARTIN

Uh, th-that's a cliff, John.

ARCHIVIST

[Sighs] Over there.

BASIRA

Oh great.

MARTIN

W– S-Ser-Seriously? What happened to the big lake or whatever

Basira was talking about? I was looking forward to the lake! I-I'm fine rowing. I'm **good** at rowing!

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry. Some routes are one-way.

MARTIN

[Mildly distressed] So, so what, this is our new path then? Some rickety ladder on a cliff edge that's so high you can't even see the bottom? Really?

ARCHIVIST

I'll admit it's not a subtle metaphor.

[BASIRA CHUCKLES]

MARTIN

[Sullen] Yeah I get it. I don't need another lesson on nightmare geography. It was obvious as soon as I said it out loud.

ARCHIVIST

If there was another way…

MARTIN

Yeah, but there never is. Urgh, fine. Come on.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS ON METAL AS THEY DESCEND THE LADDER, THE WIND SWIRLING LOUDLY AROUND THEM]

MARTIN

[To himself] Okay… Easy does it.

One at a time. One at a time.

BASIRA

Careful of your next one, Martin! It's loose.

MARTIN

Hmm.

Right! Thank you!

Brilliant.

[CAREFUL FOOTSTEP, THEN METAL CREAKS AND GIVES WAY WITH A CLATTER AND SHOWER OF PEBBLES]

[MARTIN EXCLAIMS IN SHOCK AS HE REGAINS HIS FOOTING]

ARCHIVIST

Martin! Martin, are you alright?

MARTIN

[Mildly panicked] Mmmhmm!

BASIRA

[Gentle] I did warn you.

MARTIN

Mmmhmm!

BASIRA

Are you good to keep going?

MARTIN

Yeah, just… just… Yeah.

[METALLIC SOUNDS AS DESCENT CONTINUES]

ARCHIVIST

Martin, would it help to know that if you do fall, you'll be okay?

MARTIN

[Suspicious] Define "okay".

ARCHIVIST

I, uh – You wouldn't die.

MARTIN

Yeah, but it would still hurt, wouldn't it?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, yes.

But not as much as th–

MARTIN

And, crucially, it would still **feel** like I'm falling an incredible distance. Wouldn't it?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, you **would** still be falling an incredible distance.

You just wouldn't die when you hit the bottom.

MARTIN

Yeah, and there it is.

BASIRA

Oh, I have missed your pep-talks.

ARCHIVIST

I'm afraid it's the best I can manage.

MARTIN

Yeah, well, thanks for trying.

BASIRA

Can we just keep going?

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[LADDER DESCENDING CONTINUES FOR A WHILE, THEN…]

Ah.

BASIRA

What?

ARCHIVIST

Right.

BASIRA

"Right", what?

MARTIN

Guys, what's going on down there?

ARCHIVIST

The, uh… The ladder ends.

MARTIN

What do you mean it ends?

BASIRA

I'm guessing you're not talking about the ground.

ARCHIVIST

No. No ground. And… no more ladder.

MARTIN

So what do we do?

BASIRA

What do you think? We jump. And we fall.

[MARTINS CHUCKLES IN DISBELIEF]

MARTIN

What?! No! No, no. I'm not, I'm not doing that. This is, this is obviously like a wrong turn or something.

BASIRA

It's a ladder, Martin.

MARTIN

Yeah, I know, Basira, but somehow we've still managed it!

BASIRA

You said it won't kill us, right?

ARCHIVIST

Right. We'll just need to try and –

MARTIN

[Babbling to self] Jesus… Seriously? Hah! If, if all your friends jumped off a cliff would you join them? No! No, I wouldn't! cos it's stupid!

BASIRA

[Sharp enough to snap Martin out of it] Martin! Enough!

ARCHIVIST

We just want to make sure we separate out so we don't hit each other on the way down, or – Oh! Ah.

MARTIN

Oh, Christ, what now?

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, I, uh… hah.

MARTIN

Are you serious?!

BASIRA

You couldn't have made a statement **before** we got on the ladder?

ARCHIVIST

That's not how it works!

MARTIN

Oh c–

BASIRA

Fine. I'm out, then. You coming Martin?

[THE LADDER CREAKS PARTICULARLY OMINOUSLY IN THE WIND]

MARTIN

Oh… S-So my choices are jump off a cliff, or cling to it while John does a statement?

BASIRA

And then jump off it. Yeah.

MARTIN

[Distressed] For fuck's sake…

Fine.

BASIRA

Okay.

MARTIN

Mmhmm.

BASIRA

On three.

One…

[METALLIC CREAK AS MARTIN LEAPS WITH A GRIMACE AND A SHOUT THAT IS SOON SWALLOWED BY THE WIND]

[Sighs] Or just go then, I guess.

[BASIRA JUMPS WITH A NOISE OF DETERMINATION AND IS SIMILARLY GONE]

[THE ARCHIVIST EXHALES AS STATEMENT STATIC BRIEFLY RISES]

[SOUNDS OF LADDER CLIMBING, LOTS OF HEAVY BREATHING AND OMINOUSLY CREAKING METAL, LOOSE ROCK DUST AND HEAVY WINDS]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Down

And down

And down again

Rung after rung after rung to run down a long forever way to nowhere

A simple path, a line that was defined before we first stepped off the edge

We beg to find another way but all around despair is only empty, hollow air

Don’t look down.

Don’t see how far it is to fall.

And still we do not know what lurks so far below and waits upon the ground

The only sound the howling gale that tries to break us and the tinny click and clack of rusted rungs begun so far above

Or below.

Which way we move is but a distant glimpse of what might once be hope

But now is only only vertigo

As metal creaks and screams the beams of this iron thin and dying skeleton we hold to spite the sky

We don’t want to die

But what else is there to do but climb

Don’t look down

Don’t look up

The rung above is smooth and white and cool as aged bone

Slick and brittle as the future

Dead and silent as the past

The rung below is eaten through with rust

And creaks and snaps to amber dust when we try to place a foot upon it

[A RUNG BREAKS, SENDING METAL AND STONES FALLING]

Fall away, rotten thing

And leave us to grip with stiff and frozen fingers as we try to linger

here and

Not look down

Not follow in your path

Not surrender to the air

[SCREECHING STARTS, FAINT THEN DRAWING NEARER]

There is another noise

A screeching cry from out the sky and lost as fast within its wide embrace

It is a body, no, a pair, a dozen panicked flailing shapes their mouths agape

With all the terror that we keep within our heart and try to swallow

As the void that claims these souls will swallow them

[SCREECHES TURN TO DISCORDANT SHRIEKS AND THEN TO SCREAMS]

It’s raining

Cadavers that do not know they’re dead

Or do they

For from their ragged throats they seem to have no doubt as to their

fate

They shout and plead and bargain for gravity to wait and give another chance to hold the ladder close

Then they are gone

Abandoned by all but the indifferent pull

Of the waiting ground below

But they fall slow enough that maybe we may see within their faces

Us

In feature or in name there's no reflection but the dreadful pained inflection of their fall

We see our end

And when they pass so fast it seems perhaps they were not there at all

We pause and sweat and shake and swear

It will not be us

And we don't look down

The wind returns to shake the rails to which we bind our path and bids us to continue but

Something has changed

We reach up with a shaking hand

No

We reach down with a nervous foot

No

And all within an instant comes the gut-felt blow that we no longer know which way we were directed

A moment comes to mind from tinted memory of finding that the sole escape for us was down

Beyond the crumbled precipice to descend upon this shaking metal thing

And find a solid earth below it where we might be free

And yet there is another other coloured but no less in focused clarity or recall

Of a muddy foetid swamp that clings in cloying clumping damp

And tried to pull us to itself and claim our last breaths within its awful depths

So in the dread of our extremity we grasp the slick and filthy rungs

To pull us up and out

But now the air is all we see and there may be no cliff or swamp to flee

Or imagine as salvation from this ladder that is all we know exists

All else is empty

And so we wait

Our breath held close within our chest

As we wait for a sign of what's to come

Where we might go

We look up at last

And see its twisting stretch that pulls away in all infinity to nothing

And we retch to think of all that way to climb to find nothing but a waving orphaned tip

Surmounting all our fears

We look down at last

And the space below us is not endless

But far worse the ground is there so bleak and bare and hard and waiting hungry for our fall

How many miles we cannot count for as we try to think about such measurements

It seems to move away

Any yet such distance does not dim its need to feed upon our

shattered broken form

And so we cling

Desperate

Unmoving

Holding out with all our might against the smouldering fire of that awful dark desire to surrender

To the open arms of empty air

As the bodies start to fall around us once again

[STATIC RISES AND THEN FADES]

ARCHIVIST

Right. Well. I guess that's it, then.

A one…

[EXHALING, HE RELEASES HIS GRIP AND FALLS]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[THE ARCHIVIST GROANS IN PAIN]

MARTIN

John?

ARCHIVIST

[Pained] Mmhmm. I'm here.

I am here.

BASIRA

Come on, even Martin didn't make this much fuss.

MARTIN

I resent that.

[COUGHING SOUNDS]

ARCHIVIST

[Wincing] There is a big difference between knowing pain and experiencing it.

MARTIN

Don't worry, it passes pretty quickly.

ARCHIVIST

I know.

MARTIN

Of course you do.

ARCHIVIST

But it hasn't passed yet.

MARTIN

Nope.

BASIRA

Alright, let's get you up.

[ARCHIVIST IS ASSISTED UP WITH SOME PAINED EXCLAMATIONS]

ARCHIVIST

Okay. I'm okay.

BASIRA

Martin says that's London up ahead.

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

Looks even more messed up than usual.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. We, uh, we should be okay, but best be careful.

MARTIN

Yeah keep an eye out.

BASIRA

Was that a joke, or…?

ARCHIVIST

Come on. Let's get home.

[FOOTSTEPS AS THEY START WALKING]

MARTIN

You mean the tunnels?

ARCHIVIST

I suppose. I don't really know.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[FOOTSTEPS AND VOICES ECHO AS THEY PROCEED THROUGH THE TUNNELS]

MARTIN

Hello?

ARCHIVIST

Georgie? Melanie?

MELANIE

[Muffled] In here.

[STEPS AS THEY MOVE INTO THE INDICATED ROOM]

MARTIN

Hey, what happened here? Are you both okay? Where is everybody?

GEORGIE

[Upset] They came for them. Took them away. Like before.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, god.

MARTIN

Who's 'they'?

GEORGIE

The… things from the city. You know, the, the ones that serve that big eye.

ARCHIVIST

Because of me?

MELANIE

Probably.

GEORGIE

W– It doesn't matter. *[Sighs]* It's the same as last time. We thought maybe keeping our numbers down might help, but… No, it was always borrowed time.

MELANIE

W-We tried to stop them, but –

GEORGIE

There, there were just too many. We… we couldn't do anything. Just had to listen as they were dragged off.

MARTIN

I'm so sorry.

BASIRA

Damn.

MELANIE

Ha-Hang on? Basira, is that you?

BASIRA

Heya, Melanie. How, uh, how are you?

MELANIE

I'm fi– I mean… fine compared to – You know. Anyway, come here.

[MELANIE AND BASIRA HUG]

Where've you been?

BASIRA

Just wandering. I'll tell you about it later.

GEORGIE

You got Martin back, then?

ARCHIVIST

We did.

MARTIN

I was actually doing alright until you showed up, and then

Annabelle started acting up for company.

BASIRA

At which point we rescued you from certain death.

MARTIN

[Grumbling] Well, hardly *certain* death.

GEORGIE

Well, it's good to see you in one piece. I assume the spider-woman is, um…?

ARCHIVIST

Actually, no, it's a bit more complicated than that.

MELANIE

No, I'll have a real answer, thanks.

MARTIN

Annabelle wasn't trying to kill anyone. She just wanted to offer us a choice. Sort of, tell us about another option, I guess.

GEORGIE

That sounds… ominous.

MARTIN

Hmmm.

BASIRA

It is.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

You got anything to drink in those supplies of yours? I think I could really do with one.

[RATTLE OF GLASS]

We need to talk. All of us.

[CLICK]

MAG199 – Seeing It Through

Statement ########-39

[CLICK]

[ALL VOICES IN THIS EPISODE HAVE TUNNEL OR TOWER ECHO IN SOME FORM]

MELANIE

So…

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[UNCOMFORTABLE PAUSE]

MARTIN

Anyone want another cup of tea?

[SOMETHING WOODEN SCRAPES ACROSS TUNNEL FLOOR]

Well, heh, I say ‘tea’, it’s har–

GEORGIE

We can't keep putting it off. We need to talk about this. About what we're going to do.

MARTIN

You mean what **John**'s going to do.

BASIRA

No. If we're doing this, it's gonna take all of us.

MELANIE

You say "If"? It's basically our only option, right?

ARCHIVIST

No, it's not.

MELANIE

So, we're seriously holding up 'let John become god' as a legitimate choice here?

BASIRA

We can't just dismiss it.

[EXASPERATED EXHALES]

MARTIN

Yes, we can.

MELANIE

Seconded!

MARTIN

[Pleased] Thank you.

GEORGIE

We still have to discuss it.

Let's try to lay this out properly. What are our actual options here? As far as I can see there are three.

MELANIE

Okay.

GEORGIE

One. We follow Annabelle's plan. We destroy the Panopticon, kill Elias –

ARCHIVIST

Jonah –

GEORGIE

Whatever.

ARCHIVIST

– Magnus.

GEORGIE

We kill him, and release the Fears into… how many other realities?

BASIRA

She said thousands, but I don't think she actually knows.

GEORGIE

John?

ARCHIVIST

Not something I can see, I'm afraid.

GEORGIE

But is it **all** other realities, or just some of them?

ARCHIVIST

Does it matter?

MARTIN

I mean, maybe? If there are **infinite** worlds out there then "thousands" isn't even a drop in the bucket, cosmically speaking.

MELANIE

“Cosmically speaking”?

MARTIN

You know what I mean.

[MELANIE SIGHS]

BASIRA

It’s still more than one, though, isn’t it? Which is what we’re discussing.

GEORGIE

So again, option one is to kill Jonah Magnus –

MELANIE

Mmhmm.

GEORGIE

– and release the Fears. Save the world, but doom other realities to the Fears.

MELANIE

We don’t **know** they’ll be doomed.

GEORGIE

Spread the fears to other realities.

Option two is John takes over from Magnus. Keeps the Powers contained here with us, and tries his best to make the place a little more… tolerable, until the end.

MARTIN

And we lose him.

ARCHIVIST

Martin…

MARTIN

No, John, I'm sorry, but if one world still matters in an *infinite* spread of dimensions, then one person does, too.

MELANIE

I-I think the issue is he matters a bit too much.

MARTIN

The point is you don't have a responsibility to sacrifice yourself just to make everyone else's lives a bit easier.

ARCHIVIST

I've already made them a hell of a lot harder!

MELANIE

Hmmm.

MARTIN

[Sharply] Then we should **all** sacrifice ourselves, because everyone in this room has some responsibility for it.

MELANIE

Hey! Georgie didn't do anything!

GEORGIE

No, Melanie, I, I didn't.

MELANIE

[Softly] Yeah.

GEORGIE

And maybe I should have. I kept out of it, even when I got a pretty good idea of what was going on towards the end. But… I should have known better. Hiding never helps.

MELANIE

It keeps you alive.

GEORGIE

For a while! But… we couldn't actually do anything, could we? Couldn't save anyone.

BASIRA

Okay, fine, blame for everyone. But the hard fact is, John's the only one who can take over the Panopticon.

MARTIN

Would you stop just putting everything on **him**?

GEORGIE

Which brings us to our third option.

ARCHIVIST

Which is?

GEORGIE

Do nothing. We… adapt to the new world, and just wait for it to finally end.

ARCHIVIST

Leaving everyone to just suffer until the Powers burn out.

MARTIN

You said yourself that even if you did take over, you couldn't **stop** the suffering. If we keep it all trapped here, it's gonna be hell either way.

BASIRA

It's alright for us though, isn't it? We're not the ones trapped in our

worst nightmares.

MELANIE

What's your point?

BASIRA

Do we actually have the right to make this decision? The five of us? For the whole world, or for maybe infinite worlds we know nothing about?

GEORGIE

No, of course we don't. But we're the ones **here**. And I doubt there's anyone else out there who's in a better position to decide.

ARCHIVIST

There isn't.

GEORGIE

So, we're the ones that have to make the call, and we need to acknowledge that doing nothing is still on the table as an option.

[LONG EXHALES]

BASIRA

We could ask them.

GEORGIE

Who?

BASIRA

The people trapped in the domains. The ones **actually** doing the suffering. Why don't we see what they want?

ARCHIVIST

[Pained] Because I already know. They want it to stop.

But to try and explain it all to them, give them enough context for them to make an actual, meaningful choice… I don't think it's possible while they're still trapped. They're too much a part of their domains.

BASIRA

So we bring them out.

[To Melanie & Georgie] You've rescued people before; **we** can do it again.

GEORGIE

True…

MARTIN

S-Sure, but we can't bring **everyone** out. So then, all we're actually doing is deciding who makes the call with even less understanding

than us.

MELANIE

Right? It's kind of shitty to bring them out just to ask them if they're willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good.

MARTIN

Mmm.

BASIRA

Shittier than just making the decision for them?

MELANIE

If the decision is to do it, maybe they'd be grateful we saved them the guilt.

MARTIN

If it's just a matter of guilt, then I'll take it right now. I'd rather live the rest of my life lying awake wondering if I made the right choice, over lying awake listening to the screams of everyone on Earth being tortured!

ARCHIVIST

[Angry] What? So it's better for a thousand times more people to scream as long as **we** can't hear them?

MARTIN

No! Because Annabelle said it wouldn't be like that. Wherever they go, it'll be like it was here before, with the Powers just lurking on the edges.

MELANIE

And our world survived like that for… for what, **all** of history?

MARTIN

Mmmm.

MELANIE

Sure, it's not great, but it's, it's not like those other realities won't have bad stuff happening already. We all lived with monsters in the shadows, and we just got on with it.

BASIRA

Yeah, until we didn't – until the ritual kicked off. What's to stop the same thing happening in these other worlds?

MARTIN

It, it took like millennia of failed rituals before this happened. That means there **has** to be a chance that it won't happen at all, right?

GEORGIE

Maybe.

MELANIE

And if it does happen, it will be because of the actions of the people in those other dimensions, just like here it was because of –

ARCHIVIST

Me.

MELANIE

Because of us.

…

My **point** is, we can't take responsibility for the **hypothetical** actions of **hypothetical** people in **all** these other universes.

Fundamentally, the Fears travelling to these other places isn't a death sentence. And even if the worst happens, they might just find themselves in exactly the same situation as us, deciding whether to pass it all along again.

MARTIN

Like the worst chain letter ever.

MELANIE

Exactly. Probably have their own Panopticon, their own Archivists.

MARTIN

[Shudders] Their own Martin.

MELANIE

If they're unlucky. Heh.

MARTIN

Oh, ha, ha.

ARCHIVIST

But the point is, we have a chance to stop all that. We, we don't have to post the letter. We can keep them contained, a-and even eventually destroy them.

GEORGIE

Can we?

MARTIN

What do you mean?

GEORGIE

Well… Did Annabelle say for certain that **this** dimension is where they were, um, 'born', I guess?

ARCHIVIST

No. No, the Eye can't see its own creation, so… I don't actually know how they came to be. Perhaps we can't know.

GEORGIE

So, how can we be sure they didn't come through to our reality in exactly this way? Maybe we're just another link in a long chain of these things spreading from one dimension to the other, growing at the edges, manifesting, and then escaping to somewhere new.

MARTIN

Like weeds.

BASIRA

Or a fungus.

ARCHIVIST

Sure, but even if that was true, it doesn't change the situation.

BASIRA

Yes, it does. If it's a choice between stopping the Fears completely – destroying them once and for all, here and now – or just being one universe they don't escape, among potentially infinite ones where they do… Those are **very** different scenarios.

They are to me, at least.

ARCHIVIST

We don't know. And even if we hunted Annabelle down, and squeezed more information out of her, I don't think she knows either. We simply **don't** have that information, and we can't just arbitrarily decide what's true just because it makes the choice easier

for us.

MARTIN

And you can't just arbitrarily decide it isn't because you want a better reason to martyr yourself!

ARCHIVIST

That's not what's happening!

MARTIN

Isn't it?

MELANIE

Either way, it's not an unreasonable conclusion. It's just as likely as **this** dimension being where they were born. I-It's more likely, even, which means we'd be condemning everyone for no reason.

ARCHIVIST

Hardly "no reason". And let's be honest for a second, you just want an excuse to stick a knife in Jonah Magnus.

GEORGIE

John!

MELANIE

No, he's got a point. I want that smug bastard dead, and if I got a

chance to do it myself, you can bet I would do it in a heartbeat. But if **you** think that's all I care about here, then frankly you can fuck off out my tunnels on your high horse.

[TENSE PAUSE]

MARTIN

I, I can't just hang around, and watch the whole world **linger** like this on the off-chance that it **might** do some small good somewhere else.

ARCHIVIST

Maybe it doesn't have to linger.

BASIRA

You want to think very hard about your next words.

ARCHIVIST

I'm just saying… If I took my place in the Panopticon, I'd hoped I could make it easier for everyone, but… maybe I could just make it faster. Shuffle people towards The End. Accelerate things.

[GEORGIE SHIVERS]

GEORGIE

Would The Eye even let you do that?

ARCHIVIST

It's like Annabelle said, it doesn't really do foresight. As long as it was fed, I doubt it would even know until it was too late. And The Web couldn't touch me once I was in control.

GEORGIE

John, you're talking about killing the whole world…

ARCHIVIST

You're the one who wanted to cover every option. We need to admit that ending it quickly might be a kindness.

The truth is, **any** choice we make is going to lead to an atrocity of one sort or another. At least this way we **know** the suffering ends.

BASIRA

No. No, I'm not just gonna stand here, and watch you try to justify murdering humanity.

ARCHIVIST

[Angry] How is it different from just letting it happen on its own?

BASIRA

[Forceful] Because it is. It's not an option. End of discussion.

ARCHIVIST

Basira –

MARTIN

Uh, I just can't accept it's really that hopeless. There's got to be a **chance** that these other universes will figure something out that we didn't.

MELANIE

They'll have as much of a chance as we did. More, maybe. The Fears had a long time to get a foothold in our world.

ARCHIVIST

Assuming time even works the same in different dimensions.

[MELANIE SIGHS]

GEORGIE

We've got to hope.

ARCHIVIST

Hope that our actions don't destroy countless other worlds!

GEORGIE

It's better than the certainty that they'll destroy this one!

[TENSE SILENCE]

ARCHIVIST

Sounds like you've all decided, then.

BASIRA

Seems that way.

GEORGIE

Shall we vote on it, or something?

ARCHIVIST

[A touch miffed] No need. Seems pretty much unanimous at this point. We take out the Panopticon, and just **hope** for the best.

MARTIN

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. I'm going for a cigarette.

[FOOTSTEPS]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

[BACKGROUND NOISE OF THE WATCHERS MOVING AND MECHANICAL WHIRRING]

[CLIMBING FOOTSTEPS, AND A LONG EXHALATION]

GEORGIE

You do know there's an indoor smoking ban right?

ARCHIVIST

They'll make an exception for me.

[FAINT CHUCKLE FROM GEORGIE]

Besides, I can't really think down there.

[DRAG ON CIGARETTE]

That's not true, I can. It's just… exhausting. Puts me in a foul mood.

It's better up here, close to The Eye. Thoughts come quicker.

GEORGIE

If it's any consolation, you seemed pretty on the ball earlier.

ARCHIVIST

It isn't, really, but… thank you.

GEORGIE

Can I have a cigarette?

[ARCHIVIST SMIRKS BEFORE PASSING ONE OVER]

ARCHIVIST

Hmm. Sure. I thought you quit?

GEORGIE

I did, for my health. But it's already the apocalypse, so… I'll need a light too.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[LIGHTER SNICKS OPEN]

[GEORGIE LIGHTS UP]

GEORGIE

I tried to avoid it in the tunnels when we had our, uh… When the others were here.

Nice lighter.

ARCHIVIST

Hmm?

[FAINT STATIC RISES AND FALLS]

You didn't want to tarnish the image of the prophets?

GEORGIE

Just didn't think they wanted one of their revered leaders puffing away in the corner.

[THE ARCHIVIST MURMURS AN ASSENT]

Saw a bishop smoking once when I was a kid, full Easter regalia and all. Really weirded me out.

ARCHIVIST

[Soft chuckles] I should probably quit myself, then.

[LIGHT METALLIC SOUND]

GEORGIE

Then you won't mind if I hang onto this?

ARCHIVIST

[Distracted] Hmm.

[FAINT STATIC RISES AND FALLS]

GEORGIE

I'm sorry. I know you hate what we're doing.

ARCHIVIST

I hate all the options. I just… It's all my fault, you know?

GEORGIE

What, because you weren't able to outsmart the literal embodiment of manipulation and scheming?

ARCHIVIST

Mmm.

GEORGIE

We all make bad choices, John. It's not your fault some eldritch horror decided yours were going to affect the whole world.

ARCHIVIST

They were still **my** choices.

GEORGIE

Yeah. And you live with them. Or you don't. That's all there is, really.

ARCHIVIST

Hmm.

[SOUNDS OF MOVEMENT FROM BELOW]

GEORGIE

Anyway, looks like your next appointment's here.

Thanks for the smoke.

[GEORGIE STANDS TO LEAVE]

ARCHIVIST

Georgie…

GEORGIE

Yeah?

ARCHIVIST

I, um…

…

[FAINT FOOTSTEPS CLIMBING THE STAIRS]

I'm glad you and Melanie have each other through all this.

GEORGIE

Thanks.

And I’m glad you’ve got him.

[FOOTSTEPS GET CLEARER]

GEORGIE

He’s all yours.

MARTIN

Thanks.

[GEORGIE’S FOOTSTEPS DESCEND AND FADE]

You alright?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

Sorry it got so heated in there.

MARTIN

Don’t be. I’d have been more worried if you were super calm about it.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

MARTIN

I'd understand if you hate me right now.

ARCHIVIST

What? No! No, Martin, I love you. I always will. And I know you love me too. I mean… *[sighs]* that's it, isn't it? That's the real core of it. You want to save me.

MARTIN

I want you to save yourself.

[LONG DRAG OF CIGARETTE]

ARCHIVIST

Sometimes… I imagine if none of this had happened. If we had just… met. Been together, without… all of this.

MARTIN

[Softly] Me, too.

…

But we wouldn't have, would we? Been together, I mean.

ARCHIVIST

Huh? W-What do you mean?

MARTIN

Well, we had that, didn't we? Almost a year of just working a normal job together, and you hated me.

ARCHIVIST

I didn't 'hate' you.

MARTIN

No, no, no, no. I listened to those tapes. At one point you explicitly said you'd be fine with me being chopped up by that old jigsaw lady.

ARCHIVIST

Oh god, Angela! Ha! She's still about, you know? Lording it over a nasty little Flesh domain.

Anyway, I didn't explicitly say it. I… implied it.

MARTIN

Face it, John, it took almost two years of crisis and trauma to even make us compatible. And that sucks. But here we are.

And I don't want it to be for nothing. I won't let it.

ARCHIVIST

That's very sweet of you, Martin.

Sort of.

Thank you.

MARTIN

Wherever you go, I go. That's it.

ARCHIVIST

You promised to let me go. If I had to.

MARTIN

And you promised not to go if there was any other choice.

And there is. So that's the deal.

ARCHIVIST

That's the deal.

MARTIN

I guess that's why it really bothers me, you know? I try, but I can't actually imagine ever making a decision that I knew meant losing you.

And it… It hurts to know you can.

ARCHIVIST

You didn't damn the world, Martin.

MARTIN

We all –

ARCHIVIST

[Harsh] No! “We all” nothing!

I, I’m the one who caused all of this, that’s just the truth of it! I’m the one whose whole life has been nothing but one long setup to this.

MARTIN

John…

ARCHIVIST

[With sadness] You didn’t speak the words! You didn’t feel them move through you, vomiting out of you like…

…

I did this. It’s my fault. And I don’t want… I can’t let anyone else feel that. That helpless, enormous guilt.

Ever.

[ARCHIVIST SNIFFS AS IF TEARING UP]

MARTIN

Hey. Hey, hey, hey, hey, come here, come here.

[FABRIC RUSTLES, WITH SNIFFS FROM THE ARCHIVIST]

We're going to fix it.

ARCHIVIST

No.

We're just going to pass it on.

MARTIN

You don't know that.

[THEY BOTH COMPOSE THEMSELVES]

ARCHIVIST

Come on. The others will be waiting.

[FOOTSTEPS DESCEND]

[MARTIN SIGHS HEAVILY]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

GEORGIE

I'm not sure. They said they were out – Oh, hey.

[DOOR CREAKS, FOOTSTEPS ENTER]

ARCHIVIST

There you are. I was getting worried.

MELANIE

We were scouting. I was showing Basira where we think the gas mainline is.

MARTIN

And?

BASIRA

Not good. You know those eye things?

ARCHIVIST

The old Archivists?

BASIRA

Yeah. I think they know something's up. The place is crawling with them. It's like they're looking for something.

MELANIE

Or patrolling.

MARTIN

Hmm.

GEORGIE

That's why the stairs were unguarded?

BASIRA

It looks that way.

MELANIE

Mmm.

ARCHIVIST

So what's the plan?

MELANIE

I reckon me and Georgie go for the mainline, and hopefully they won't notice us.

GEORGIE

I'll need a torch. They might notice that.

BASIRA

I'll give a diversion; I'll try and draw them off.

MELANIE

And if they see Georgie's torch, we just go to Plan B. She becomes another distraction, and I go solo.

GEORGIE

I don't like the thought of you going on your own.

MELANIE

And I don't like the thought of **you** being chased by manky old archivists, but there it is.

MARTIN

Okay. So what are you going to do when you find it?

GEORGIE

We've got some old tools. I guess we just mess with it until we smell gas, and then back off, set something burning and leg it. It can't be that hard to break a valve.

MELANIE

John, you're sure about this whole gas main thing? It just seems, I don't know, really mundane.

ARCHIVIST

It's what Annabelle said, and she wasn't lying. At least, she didn't think she was.

BASIRA

Well, it's a bit late for second-guessing.

MARTIN

How… How big is the explosion going to be?

GEORGIE

Big enough. Honestly, I'm kind of hoping there's some sort of supernatural reason it will channel up into the tower, otherwise, uh… it's going to be bad news down here.

MARTIN

Don't get yourselves hurt.

GEORGIE

Well, we'll do what we can, but this is it. Whatever it takes, right? If there's a price, we pay it. No hesitations.

MELANIE

And it's hardly going to be a picnic for you, either. You're going up that tower to kill Elias, and if we muck up the timing, you'll be up there when it blows.

MARTIN

John can't do it.

ARCHIVIST

What?

MELANIE

Sure he can, just magic-laser-eye zap him or whatever, same as with all the others. Like he did to Helen.

ARCHIVIST

Listen, Melanie –

MELANIE

It's fine. If we all get out of this, we can talk it through. And if not, well, it doesn't really matter, does it?

ARCHIVIST

I suppose not.

MARTIN

You're not listening. I mean, if he kills Jonah, then knowing our luck he's just going to end up taking his place in the Panopticon, isn't he?

GEORGIE

[Sighs] Good point.

MARTIN

He can come up with me, but when it actually comes to Jonah…

BASIRA

You'll have to be the one to do it.

MARTIN

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Martin… I don't –

BASIRA

Have you got this? We can trade if you don't think you can do it.

MARTIN

No. No, I can do it.

MELANIE

Make sure it hurts.

MARTIN

Oh, I will.

MELANIE

Good enough for me.

BASIRA

Me too.

GEORGIE

Okay. Sounds like we've got something like a plan.

[MARTIN'S SOUND OF ASSENT]

BASIRA

Makes a nice change.

[VARIOUS SOUNDS OF ASSENT]

MELANIE

[Brightly] It does, doesn't it?

Uh… So. When do we actually do it?

GEORGIE

First thing tomorrow. That'll give us time to prep and rest.

MARTIN

Sounds good to me.

MELANIE

Right.

[GENERAL MOVEMENTS AS THEY MAKE TO LEAVE]

BASIRA

Umm, hey, John? Can you hang on a sec?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah?

BASIRA

I just mean… um…

If we don't make it out of this… I wanted to say thanks. For coming back for me. *[sighs]* What I did… Who I was… I – Thanks.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry for all of this.

BASIRA

We've all got regrets. But we can't undo what's done. All we can do is try and do something worthwhile with the time we've got left.

[HEAVY SIGH FROM THE ARCHIVIST]

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[FOOTSTEPS]

[CLICK]

MAG200 – Last Words

Statement ########-40

[CLICK]

[SCREECHING, SWIRLING STATIC INDICATES THE CENTRAL CHAMBER OF THE PANOPTICON]

[FOOTSTEPS ON MARBLE]

JONAH/ELIAS (BACKGROUND)

– and whispers deep within her mind those bitter thoughts that make her hate herself and those that reassure but cannot hide their secret loathing that will leak and spread from tongues that mumble just outside the edge of hearing things he knows will be his fate for all his efforts to protect himself and what he loves will burn away to ash inside –

ARCHIVIST

Jonah Magnus!

…

[ARCHIVIST STATIC RISES]

Ceaseless Watcher, you know why I am here.

Release him.

[STATIC CRESCENDOS AND THEN DIES DOWN AS CHANTING AND BACKGROUND STATIC DRONE CEASE]

…

Jonah Magnus.

JONAH/ELIAS

[Groggy] John? I-I-Is that you? Uh, I, I was having the most wonderful dream…

ARCHIVIST

[Icily] Get up.

JONAH/ELIAS

What's – ? Wh-what's going on? Where – ?

[METAL BLADE IS DRAWN]

Oh. I-I see.

ARCHIVIST

It's over.

JONAH/ELIAS

Is it? *[sigh]*

Yes. Yes, I suppose it must be.

[TIRED EXHALATION]

Where's Martin? I rather thought he'd be the one to do the deed.

…

[METALLIC CLINK]

Ah, I see. Going it alone, are we? Probably for the best. Empathy only holds you back in the end.

ARCHIVIST

You've failed.

JONAH/ELIAS

Have I?

ARCHIVIST

Immortality. It's impossible. Even without me, nothing escapes entropy. Not forever. Not even fear.

JONAH/ELIAS

Yes… Pity.

I suppose I always knew that, deep down. But it was wonderful while it lasted. I've seen more than I could have lived in a thousand lifetimes, and every moment was so –

ARCHIVIST

Shut up!

It ends now. All of it. I am going to take this world that you used me to create, and I am going to burn it out. It's the only way. I'm going to leave it a barren, lifeless void, cold and unafraid and then finally, when everyone's gone, and I am all that's left, I will have the satisfaction of knowing that I'll be leaving these **things** that you serve trapped and starving in their own private hell.

JONAH/ELIAS

…

That *we* serve.

ARCHIVIST

Not for much longer. I wonder if they're even capable of fearing their own ends.

I look forward to finding out.

JONAH/ELIAS

Uh, L-Look, John, a-as fun as all this melodrama is, enough is enough. We both know you that don't have it in you –

[FOOTSTEPS, FOLLOWED BY SOLID CONNECTION]

ARCHIVIST

That was for Sasha.

JONAH/ELIAS

J-John, wait!

[ANOTHER BLOW, ACCOMPANIED BY WHEEZING]

ARCHIVIST

For Tim.

JONAH/ELIAS

[Afraid] P-Please John!

[AND AGAIN]

ARCHIVIST

For Gertrude, and all the others.

[WINDED, LABOURED BREATHING]

JONAH/ELIAS

[Wheezing, pitiful] P-Please John… *[coughs]* I don't want to die.

ARCHIVIST

Neither did they.

JONAH/ELIAS

[Soft, terrified] No, no… N–

ARCHIVIST

But no-one escapes at the end.

[WITH EFFORT, THE ARCHIVIST STABS DEEPLY]

[EXTENDED SOUNDS OF CHOKING & GURGLING DEATH RATTLE]

[BODY SLUMPS HEAVILY]

JONAH/ELIAS

[Wetly] Good… luck.

[THE ARCHIVIST GASPS, DROPPED BLADE RINGS OUT ON MARBLE]

[STATIC STARTS, SHARPER AND MORE HARSHER THAN

BEFORE]

[THE ARCHIVIST CRIES OUT DISTORTEDLY]

ARCHIVIST

[Pained] – the flaying of skin… burning, retching on the smog of… hide, hide, hide… it is not real but still it comes to… falling through the pitch black daa-aaaaaargh!

[PAIN NOISES INTENSIFY THEN ARE CONTROLLED]

[CRACKLING STATIC DIMINISHES AS ARCHIVIST EXHALES TO CONTROL SELF]

[DOOR CREAKS OPEN, FOLLOWED BY TENTATIVE FOOTSTEPS]

ROSIE

Mr. Magnus, sir? Is everything alright? I, I thought I heard th–

ARCHIVIST

Rosie. You may go.

ROSIE

I, uh, I, I'm sorry Mr Sims but I was –

ARCHIVIST

[Crackling] You are dismissed.

ROSIE

Right. Y-Y-Yes. Of course. Sir.

[FOOTSTEPS AND DOOR OPENS]

Thank you.

[FOOTSTEPS FADE AS DOOR CLOSES]

[THE ARCHIVIST GASPS IN PAIN AS STATIC FLARES AGAIN]

[ANIMAL NOISES – CHIRPS, CROAKS AND CALLS]

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Once upon a time there was fear. Old fear. Primal fear. A fear of blood and pounding feet, a fear of that sudden burst of pain and then nothing. And that fear was nothing. Went nowhere. Knew not what it was.

Then it became. Or perhaps it always was and simply entered. But fear was here and true and was itself, and it hungered. It wished to know more. It wished to feel more. It wished to **be** more. And to those things that hurried through the grass, that shivered through the night in their burrows and their caves, because they knew the dark held flashing talons and shining eyes, they fed the fear. It was

blunt and it was simple, but still it was solid enough to satisfy. And the thing that was fear was sated and content.

Then came minds that knew it differently. They grew slowly, over the millennia; inch by inch they found new things to dread. The fear of their own end, of the things that lived in the darkness, became a fear of the darkness itself. And as they grew to know what it is that they saw, to give it names, and struggle at learning, so too did they learn to fear that their eyes might deceive them, or show them too much. And as they learned to know their friends and kin, so too did they learn to fear the unknown figure, the coming of the stranger, and the silence when they were alone. And when they found fire, that bright ignition of home and hope and progress, the thing that was fear gorged itself on a newfound terror once again.

[ROARING FLAME RUSHES THROUGH, FOLLOWED BY STORM SOUNDS]

And as these tiny, strange minds grew and learned, they did something new. They began to take their thoughts, their instincts and their horrors, and they crystallised them. They gave them sound and form and shape to share them. And as they did the thing that was fear felt itself began to tear, to crack and fracture along a thousand unseen fault lines. It bled and warped and multiplied, and could no longer see itself as once it did. It could never be whole again.

But within these forms were freedoms, new and wonderful dreads

to push and explore, new muscles to flex. The joy of oozing, crawling pestilence as minds distrusted their own corrupted bodies. The satisfaction of surrounding them, suffocating them, reaching down into them and drinking in their panic as breath failed them.

And as they grew to learn their place within the world, the pathetic meagreness of their own existence, they could not spin a story rich or grand enough to fully hide their own awful insignificance, lost and alone in the terrible greatness of the universe. And by the time these minds had reached a point of intricacy to lie and scheme and puppet one other, they had also learned to conceive of war.

[DRUMBEATS POUND A SINISTER CALL]

And as the things that were fear hovered at the edge of the world, the flowing horror of these minds nourished them, swelling some and withering others, pushing and pulling the shattered, swirling mass of terror into ever newer and undiscovered forms.

[SOFT VOCAL SUSURRATIONS JOIN THE DRUMS]

And something else began to happen. Some minds did not simply recoil from them and feed them. Some seemed almost to call them, to court them, to hunger for them in return. Minds that saw the faces of the things that were fear, and were compelled as much as they were repulsed. Whether or not they knew what it was they did, they called out. And they were answered.

[DRUMS FADE LEAVING BEHIND THE CHITTERING MURMURS]

Time is different for fear, and it cannot be said exactly who was the first to open themselves and be filled with the power of terror. A hermit, huddled in a pitch black cave through winter, who emerged and brought the depth of night with him wherever he trod. A pestilent chieftain who found her breath sloughed from her body and rotted whatever it touched. A warrior driven from their village, who found their face as smooth and shifting as the sands of their home. Which came first does not matter, the unseen gap was bridged, and the thin veil between the world that was and the things that were fear had been torn, ever so slightly.

[VOICES ARE JOINED THEN SUPERCEDED BY GUTTURAL ROARS]

And with this tear, they grew stronger, bolder, pouring themselves into the world and creating monsters. Long things that wore you like a suit, smiling things that stripped you from your bones, unseen things that watched and watched and watched and never left you. And with each new creation, each new servant, the Fears reached further and fed the things that made them.

And with this newfound power came greed. The hunger for more, the unformed, unfocused, but impossibly huge desire to exist. To join the minds that gave them shape and purpose, and finally drink their fill ‘til they were one and the same. They had no concept of

how, or when, or even why, but they needed it. They needed it.

[A CHORAL DRONE BEGINS]

And so the things that were fear began to sing, to draw ever more multitudes to them, to shape them and push them and beg them for freedom. For existence. But though they jostled and pushed and fought to emerge, they could not. For they could not conceive of what or where they were beyond the words and images the minds below could give them.

[FAINT BUZZING SOUNDS, AS THE ROARS FADE AWAY AND ARE REPLACED WITH AN ALMOST MECHANICAL CLACKING]

But there was one, the part that some would call the Spider, that had been given a gift beyond all its brethren. The minds that feared grew suspicious of their own schemes, of connections and consequences, and over time these suspicions became threads, then webs, then nerves that granted the Spider, the Mother-of-Puppets, the Hidden Machination, a mind of its own; to plot and plan and draw its own connections, its own conclusions. Wheels, within wheels within wheels… It would not, could not tell its other parts, for were they even able to understand such things, which they could not, to trust, to **share** in such a way ran counter to its very essence.

And so it drew its plan to escape not only this ephemeral cage of non-existence, but even the very reality into which they might

break, and it chose its fool: The Great Eye, the most unwise of all the fragments, forever seeking and consuming knowledge that it could not comprehend. It played and twisted and through The Eye brought about a new world, a wide and unending vista of terror and agony, and the place from which it might spread, and spin another web far grander than anything conceived of in the minds that birthed it.

Finally, it would find its escape and with it… apotheosis.

[SOUNDS FADE AS STATIC RISES AND THEN ITSELF FADES]

[THE ARCHIVIST EXHALES DEEPLY]

ARCHIVIST

No. It won't. It has only found its end.

[DOOR OPENS]

MARTIN

John?

[FOOTSTEPS RING ON MARBLE]

John!

ARCHIVIST

Martin, what are you doing here?

MARTIN

Oh thank god. Just, just, just stop what you're about to do, okay? I know that you think that a–

…

What's that?

ARCHIVIST

Elias… Jonah Magnus.

MARTIN

[Shocked] He's – You didn't – ?

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, Martin.

MARTIN

[Horrified & scared] You didn't. N-No. No, no, no, no, no, no. No! This isn't – You can't –

ARCHIVIST

I did. I am.

MARTIN

Why?!

ARCHIVIST

You know why. I can't let them out. I can't! Not again.

MARTIN

Oh, what have you done, John!

ARCHIVIST

Go tell the others. It's over.

MARTIN

N-No… you don't understand!

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

I'm sorry, John. I'm, I'm so sorry… I, I saw you had gone and… and I knew that you-you couldn't help yourself. You never could! I knew you'd lied to me, that you were going in alone…

ARCHIVIST

Martin? What did you do?

MARTIN

[Shaking] I told them to go early. To do it straight away and…. I'd keep you talking. Until they were done.

ARCHIVIST

[Calm] Oh, Martin.

MARTIN

I didn't think you'd go through with it! Not without me! I can't believe you'd do this! That you'd leave me like this! You swore to me! You swore to me, you bastard!

ARCHIVIST

Martin! I'm still here.

MARTIN

Are you!? How much of you is even left now?

ARCHIVIST

It's still me, Martin. I'm still here.

MARTIN

How would you even know?

ARCHIVIST

…

I'm sorry Martin, I am, but it's done. You can hate me, you can

scream at me, but it won't change anything. I had to do this. And you promised.

MARTIN

[Angry trembling] Don't you dare say that. Don't you dare!

[THE ARCHIVIST'S VOICE HAS TAKEN ON A SOFTLY RESONANT QUALITY AS STATIC STARTS TO CRACKLE FAINTLY]

ARCHIVIST

We can still be together, here. Until it's over.

MARTIN

You're not listening! You never listen! They are down there fighting those things, and lighting it right now!

ARCHIVIST

It's fine, Martin, I'll call off the servitors.

They can't light it, they don't have… they don't…

[PATS CLOTHING]

Wait a –

Oh… Oh, no.

[STATIC WAVE BURSTS ACROSS SCENE, AND THE ARCHIVIST SQUEALS IN DISTORTED AGONY]

MARTIN

John!

ARCHIVIST

Martin, I – AH! AH!

MARTIN

John, we have to get out of here!

ARCHIVIST

[Gasping] I… I can't. Martin, I'm part of this place.

[STATIC SCREECH AND HE WINCES AUDIBLY]

MARTIN

Goddamn it, John!

ARCHIVIST

[Enduring] Aaaaaaargh! I can… withstand it. I just need to hold… on…

[EXPLOSION RESOUNDS]

MARTIN

[Gritted teeth] Come on, John! Come on!

[THE ARCHIVIST'S VOICE DISTORTS AS BUILDING AND REALITY START CRACKING, WITH STATIC SCREECHING AND SQUEALING THROUGHOUT]

ARCHIVIST

[Struggling] No! I can feel the pull… The web, the tapes, it wants –

No! I won't let it!

MARTIN

For god's sake, John, move!

ARCHIVIST

I can't!

Martin, get out of here!

What's going to be left of me after this, you can't see that.

MARTIN

No!

ARCHIVIST

I can't protect you from this. Go!

MARTIN

I'm not leaving you trapped here killing the world while I watch!

ARCHIVIST

If you stay, you'll die!

MARTIN

Then I'll die!

ARCHIVIST

No!

[CRUMBLING STONE AND MARTIN CRIES OUT AS IF STRUCK BY SOMETHING, STARTS SOBBING]

ARCHIVIST

Martin, please! I can't lose you. Not like this…

MARTIN

Tough! Okay? Where you go, I go!

ARCHIVIST

That's the deal…

[PANOPTICON CONTINUES TO COLLAPSE AS A SHARP STATIC WHINE RINGS OUT]

Okay.

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

Do it! The knife's just there. Let them go.

MARTIN

[Tearful] I'm not going to kill you!

ARCHIVIST

Cut the tether. Send them away.

Maybe we both die. Probably. But maybe not. Maybe, maybe everything works out, and we end up somewhere else.

MARTIN

Together?

ARCHIVIST

One way or another. Together.

[METALLIC CLINK]

MARTIN

I don’t think I can…

ARCHIVIST

It has to be you. The Eye won’t let me do it.

MARTIN

[Sobbing] Are you sure about this?

ARCHIVIST

No.

But I love you.

MARTIN

I love you too.

[KISS]

[MARTIN STABS DEEPLY; THERE IS A SINGLE GASP]

[PAINED SOB]

[DISTORTED SCREECH, WITH SOUND LIKE TAPE RAPIDLY UNSPOOLING AMIDST A RISING CRESCENDO OF STATIC]

[THEN… CLICK]

[LONG SILENCE]

[CLICK]

[SOUND OF SHIFTING RUBBLE AND DEBRIS; BIRDSONG CAN BE HEARD FAINTLY]

BASIRA

Huh.

[MORE SHIFTING RUBBLE]

Still works.

GEORGIE

[Calling] You found something?

BASIRA

Just one of the old tape recorders.

[FOOTSTEPS ON RUBBLE]

GEORGIE

God, tough little bastards, aren't they?

BASIRA

Yup.

[MORE FOOTSTEPS OVER RUBBLE]

MELANIE

No luck?

GEORGIE

No. Still no sign of them.

BASIRA

No bodies, though. That's a good sign, maybe?

GEORGIE

Maybe.

MELANIE

Huh.

[BIRDS TWEET, WHILE SOUNDS OF PEOPLE BUILDING OR CLEARING ARE HEARD IN BACKGROUND]

Maybe it's time to accept that they're gone.

BASIRA

Hm.

MELANIE

And, honestly, it's probably for the best.

I mean, I just don't think people would exactly be understanding. You remember what happened when they found Simon Fairchild?

GEORGIE

Yeah…

MELANIE

And he's not just some powerless left-behind avatar, you know? We're talking about 'The Archivist'.

BASIRA

Yeah okay, you've made your point. *[sigh]* Would just be nice to know for sure.

GEORGIE

All we can do is hope.

BASIRA

I suppose.

[LONG PAUSE]

GEORGIE

We should go. It'll be dark soon, and we still need batteries for the nightlights.

MELANIE

And I'm sure Rosie's keen for us to take the Admiral back off her hands.

GEORGIE

She's alright, he's calmed down a lot.

MELANIE

Thank god for tinned tuna.

…

Come on.

BASIRA

What do you want me to do with this?

GEORGIE

Leave it. We're done with tapes.

MELANIE

Want me to smash it?

BASIRA

I think… we can probably just turn it off.

MELANIE

Okay.

[FOOTSTEPS AS MELANIE AND GEORGIE WALK AWAY]

BASIRA

If anyone's listening… Goodbye.

I'm sorry, and…

Good luck.

[CLICK]